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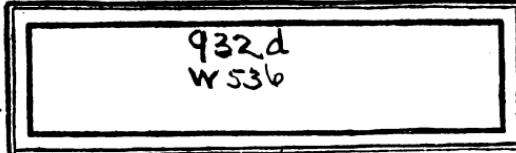
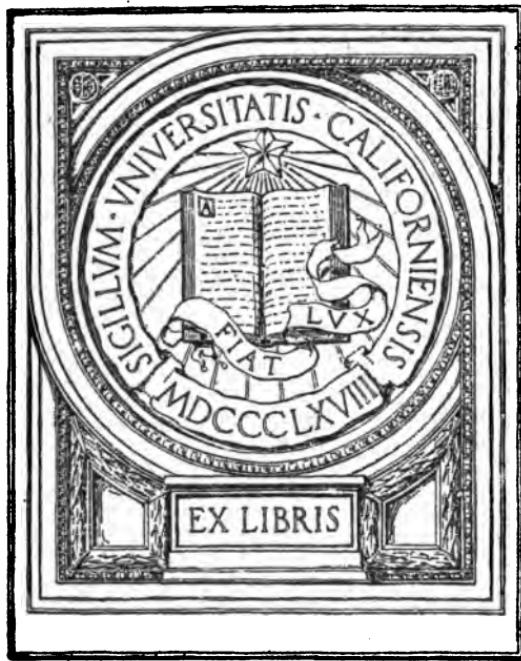
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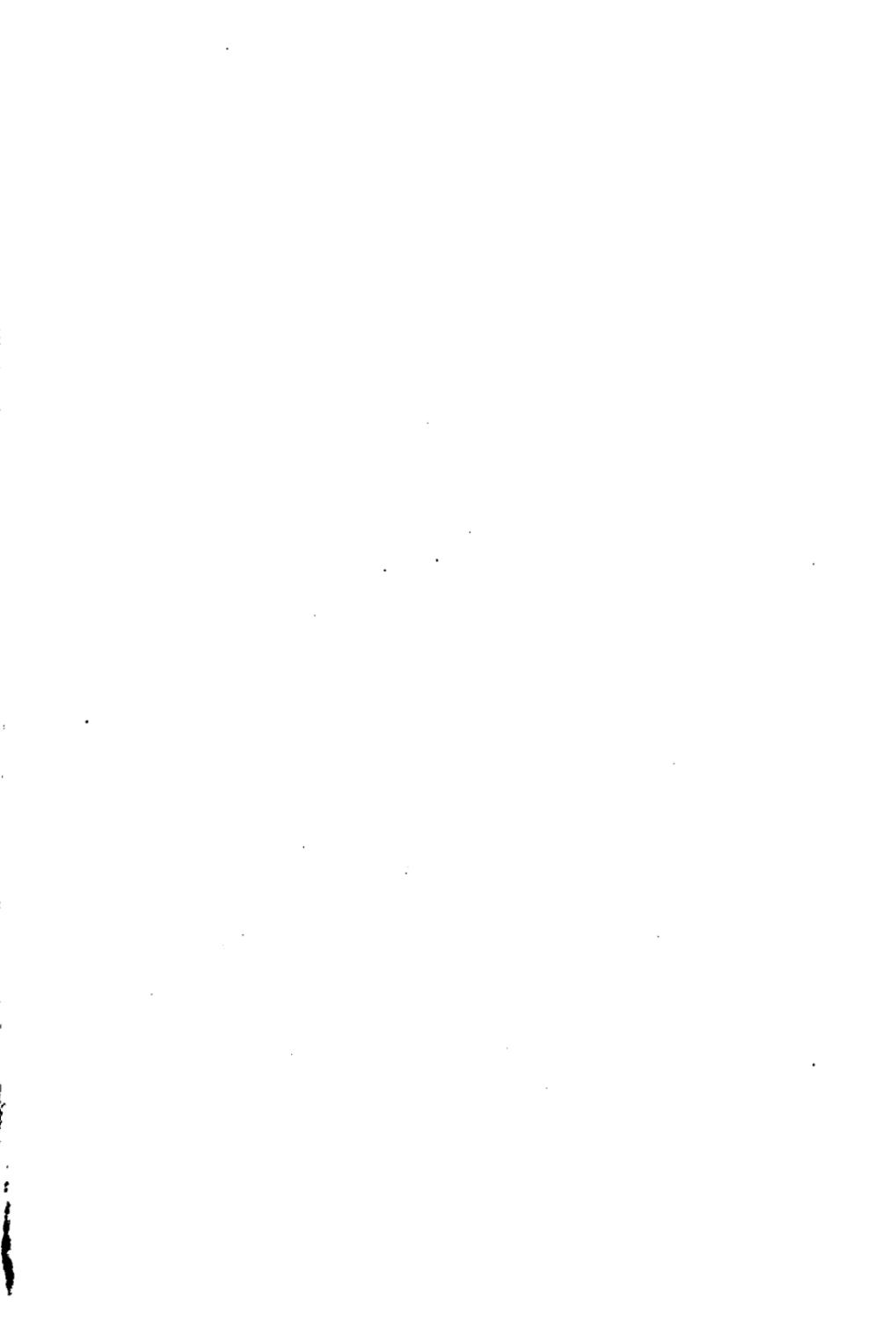
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THE ROMANCE OF GENTLE WILL



CLYDE C WESTOVER







THE ROMANCE OF GENTLE WILL



THE ROMANCE OF GENTLE WILL

A HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED CHAPTER
IN THE STORY OF THE LOVE OF THE
IMMORTAL BARD :: :: :: :: ::

BY

CLYDE C. WESTOVER



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PROEM

If, in the relation of the succeeding narrative, the chronicler has deviated in some slight degree from publicly recorded dates of certain events in the life of the famous poet, he makes no excuse, but quotes as his authority the diary of Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, from whose age-worn and well-nigh illegible pages the incidents were gleaned.

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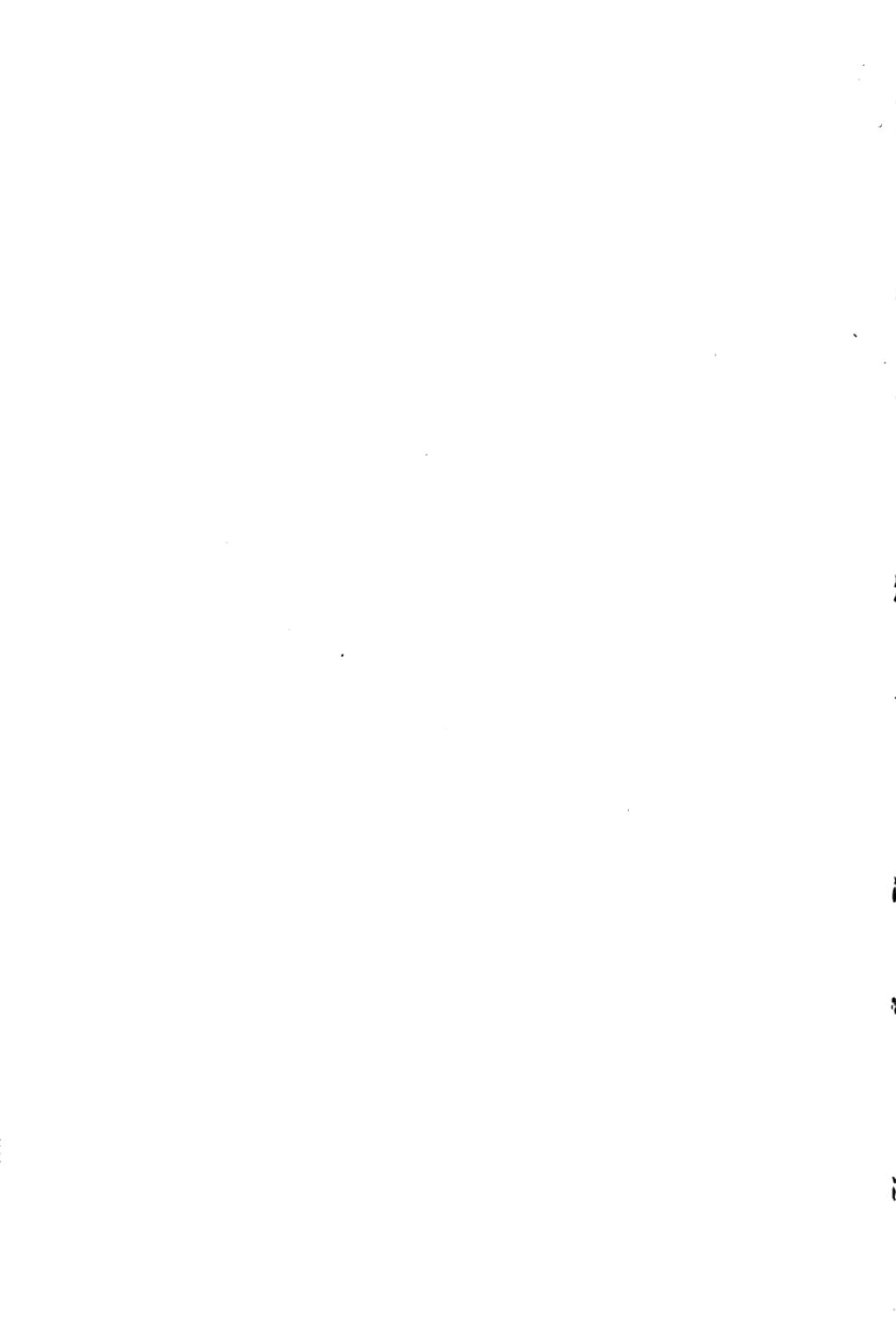
CHARACTERS IN THE TALE

THE MEN

Philip II, King of Spain.
Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester.
William Shakespeare.
Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex.
Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton.
Sir Walter Raleigh.
Sir Francis Drake.
Sir Thomas Hatton, Lord Chancellor of England.
Sir Amias Paulet, Keeper of the Tower.
Lord Bishop Kitchen of Llandaff, a Conformist Minister.
Edmund Spenser.
Governor Lane of Virginia.
The Duke of Alva.
Don Ruy Gomez De Silva, Prime Minister of Spain.
Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma.
Sir James Melville, the Scottish Embassador.
John Florio, a Master of Languages.
John Shakespeare.
Roger Covert, a Reformed Rogue.
Pulsifer Kyd, the Court Fool.
Fernando Cordes, a Spanish Assassin.
John Hallam, a Serving-Man.
Abraham, A Jewish Costumer.

THE WOMEN

Elizabeth, Queen of England.
Mary, Queen of Scots.
Anne Hathaway, Her Majesty's Hand-Maiden.
Juliet Florio.
Anne Holcombe, a Laundress.



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THE ROMANCE OF GENTLE WILL

CHAPTER I

THE QUEEN'S DEER

Early in the autumn of 1583 two lads were breaking their fast under a giant oak in the heart of Fulbroke Forest, Her Majesty's noble park at the foot of the Welcombe Hills. The younger of the twain was a somewhat dainty youth, slight of stature, and his jerkin of green cloth, studded with silver latchets, and his hose of elegant texture proclaimed him to be of a superior station to his companion, whose huge frame was clad in an ugly gray woolen stuff and whose knotted hands and homely visage indicated a condition of servitude, though there was a look of unwavering faith in the dull eyes that were fixed upon his boyish master as he listened with rapt attention and drooping jaw to the tale that he was spinning.

"Aye, Robin Hood was a merry wight, John," the lad went on, "and I would that we had lived in his day. He had many a fine adventure and his dearest pleasure was in poaching on the royal preserves.

THE VILLAGE ADVENTURE

But why do you not taste your breakfast, John? Have you no appetite for the goodies? We were up this morning a full hour before the sun and as yet no game, not even a coney, has fallen to our bows. You must stay your stomach, for we have a long day before us, and we are many miles from home."

"Master Willum, your story of Robin has made me forget my hunger, but I will make amends"; and the yokel fell to right heartily, occasionally giving a grunt of satisfaction between the mouthfuls.

The younger man sat back, picking listlessly at a morsel of cold fowl and watching with amusement the voracious cramming of his uncouth companion.

"John, they do say that Queen Elizabeth and her suite are on the highway, engaged in a pilgrimage to Robert Dudley's seat at Kenilworth, and that even now they are in the County Warwick, though why she should come so far away from London with its players and other delights ready at hand and give up the comfort and ease of her castle at Windsor I am at a loss to understand."

"Earl Dudley is a noble lord, Master Willum, and there do be gossip in the country-side that 'ur would marry the Queen, and at the Stra'ford Arms I heard a rogue last night make mention how 'ur had sent to London for a band of players to make glad Her Majesty's visit, and that various knaves were furnishing up the castle so that the Queen might see it at its best; but the villain had been drinking the dregs of many ale-pots and 'ur could not be counted in good wisdom."

"'Tis likely enough, John. Dudley has ever been a dandy, though it has never been my lot to lay eyes

upon him. 'Tis said he has an hundred changes in his wardrobe, and he displays a most gallant figure. 'Twill be strange if a man of his low birth becomes the royal consort and shares the throne of England. But the sun is getting higher, John, and here under the oaks it grows much lighter; if we would fall on game and avoid the keepers we must be alert."

"Aye, master, but it would go hard with us were 'e caught poaching with the Queen in the shire. Mayhap another day would be more safe."

"Nonsense, John, 'twill be three hours before the court dandies are up and dressed. The royal household would not venture upon the highway ere the noonday sun had robbed the shadows of their chill and dried the dew beneath the overhanging trees. I would venture much, however, if I might look upon the Queen. 'Tis a chance that may come but once in a lifetime, but 'twould be a serious matter were we caught in trespass in the royal park. Let us lift up our bows, John; we have already lost too much time in romancing."

So saying the youth stooped to pick up his crossbow and arrows which lay by the tree, and John stepped to the other side of the oak where his own shafts had been left. Something that he witnessed caused him to draw back hastily, and he clutched his master's arm with a warning "Ssh" as he drew him close to the trunk and directed his gaze to a little clearing in the forest some thirty yards distant. A noble fallow-buck had leapt into the open space and some movement or the scent of the huntsmen had caused him to stop stock-still, with head erect and quivering nostrils dilated, aware of the presence of

danger but uncertain as to its direction, awaiting some further warning ere he should bound away in precipitate flight.

The lad, with trembling fingers, fitted an arrow to his bow, but the pressure of John's strong hand upon his arm steadied his nerves and he carefully took aim. At the same moment the buck beheld the archer and with a tremendous bound leapt for the thick forest. He was an instant too late, however, for with a sharp twang of the string the arrow sped on its way and, just as his feet left the earth, buried itself deep beneath his shoulder. He crashed to the ground in the middle of his leap, and his hoofs cut deeply into the green sward in his frantic efforts to arise.

With a shout John drew his knife and rushed upon the deer. Deftly avoiding the sharp hoofs he drew his blade across its throat, and as the red blood poured forth upon the grass the eyes glazed and the noble animal's struggles were stilled.

"'Twas a gallant shot, Master Willum, and I never saw bigger fallow-buck. 'Twill be hunting enough for one day, I am thinking. 'Ur 'll be a heavy load to carry home."

"You are right, John. Your broad shoulders will be taxed to the utmost. 'Twas a lucky kill," said the youth, as he plucked the arrow from the buck's side.

John cut some strong withes from a clinging vine and tied the animal's feet together, then placing his bow between the strands he swung the carcass upon his back, following his master, who had gathered up their arrows and who had gone ahead, making his way toward the highway. The lad forgot all caution

in his joy at their success, and despite the yokel's protest began singing lustily :

"Oh troll me a catch
Of a huntsman bold
And a lad devoid of fear,
A morning gray
On the Queen's highway
And a shaft for the royal deer.

"Then, Oho my lad
We have great success
In quest of the fallow-buck,
A kingly court
Would enjoy the sport
Attended by such luck.

"Thy back is broad,
But thy face is long,
John Hallam, do not frown;
The gallows tree
Would finish thee
Were 't brought before the crown."

He stopped with a hearty laugh at John's discomfiture.

"Master Willum, your wit of making rhyme will get you into sore trouble some day. There may be ears about will not applaud your verse."

"Then let us away,
While yet we may,
From out this gloomy wood
To a tankard of ale;
Friend John, the pale,
'Twill do thy courage good,"

sang his taunting master, whose youthful spirits could not be curbed; and he pranced gaily ahead of the laboring John, and as the trees became somewhat

sparser, denoting the proximity of the highway, with a shout to John to "Make haste, you lazy fellow, we are almost out of the wood," he broke into a run and fairly plumped into the arms of two elegant gentlemen clad in green coats and satin breeches and adorned with a profusion of gold lace, who were well-nigh as startled as the lad by their abrupt meeting.

The youth stopped short in dismay, while the heavy figure of John came crashing through the twigs, bearing the tell-tale evidence of their morning's occupation.

"Oho, what have we here, Amias?" said the elder of the men, frowning ominously and toying with his sword. "Deer-stealers, upon my word! This is serious indeed. We must convey them to Elizabeth."

At these words the face of the young huntsman paled visibly and his knees seemed scarce able to support him, while his serving-man dropped the deer and set up a most piteous blubbering interspersed with incoherent pleas for mercy.

"I fear me, Sir Walter," said the man addressed as Amias, "that the Queen is in a wicked mood. She is most angered at the late start this morning and at this enforced delay to give her bearers rest, and if we deliver up these two culprits, in her impatience to proceed on her way to Kenilworth she may visit upon them the extreme penalty, that she may be rid of extra burdens on her march. Let us rather shut our eyes to their offense and allow them to pass. Some future crime may bring its punishment and Her Majesty will not suffer by the loss of one fallow-deer."

"Amias! Amias! You were ever a soft-hearted fool. 'Tis lucky you have me near to keep you in check, or the Queen's domain would be over-run with rascals. Nay, take charge of the stripling and I will attend this big fellow"; and as John re-shouldered the deer at his command he seized him by the collar and strode to the highway.

"You are my superior officer and I must obey, though I fear it is a bad business for these youngsters," said Amias as he followed with the lad.

They proceeded to a bend in the highway, where they were greeted by a cloud of dust and the sound of many trampling hoofs, which announced the approach of the royal train.

The elder man pushed forward with his prisoner, crying:

"Hold, your Majesty, we have taken two thieves in trespass on your preserves and bring them to your justice."

A voice rose in angry protest, and the embroidered curtain of a palanquin borne by a dozen sturdy guardsmen was pushed aside, while courtiers and ladies-in-waiting mounted on sleek chargers pressed forward to witness the cause of this new diversion.

"A pestilence upon you, Walter Raleigh!" said the Queen, as the bearers deposited the palanquin in the roadway. "What cursed fate retards our every movement? Am I to be harassed and delayed because your vigilance has unearthed some poaching knave? Why did you not flog him and let him go, that I might on to Kenilworth?"

The lackeys drew the curtains apart and displayed the irate person of Queen Elizabeth, who in handsome gown embroidered with the royal arms, and with neck encased in an enormous ruff, her abundant head of reddish hair dressed in a coiffure of pearls and diamonds, sat in her carved and cushioned seat, her dainty foot tapping impatiently, her tapering fingers clutching the arm of her chair and her eyes flashing spitefully at Raleigh, who stood, hat in hand, in front of his prisoner.

"Your Majesty," said he, stepping aside and disclosing the lout with his burden, "Sir Amias Paulet was of some such mind as yourself, but the offense was most flagrant. This man bears a fallow-buck, but just now killed in the forest of Fulbroke, and it were a bad example indeed to let these varlets go unpunished."

"A deer-stealer, did you say, Sir Walter? A fitting welcome for my advent into Warwick. You did well to seize him. I will teach these country boobies to mock me in my own park. Let two of my guards take this fellow and hang him quickly on the nearest oak, while we will hasten on our way that our pleasure may not be marred by the sight of his dangling carcass."

"There are two, your Majesty," said Raleigh, while the Queen scowled anew.

As he spoke the younger lad broke from Amias Paulet's restraining grasp, and stepping to John Hallam's side addressed the Queen:

"Your Majesty," said he, "there is but one who merits punishment. Let your royal displeasure fall

upon my head. I killed the deer while this honest lad did but bear him from the forest at my request."

With an angry snort Elizabeth surveyed the youth from head to foot.

"Have done with heroics," she said. "What is your name?"

"I am called William Shakespeare," he answered, "and this is John Hallam, serving-man to my father, Master John Shakespeare."

"Well, for your boldness, I will spare your father his serving-man. Raleigh, you will seize Young Arrogance and execute upon him the sentence I had but now passed upon his man. We will show this country bumpkin how unsafe it is to trifle with an angry queen. Let the cavalcade proceed. Sir Amias Paulet, you will attend me."

Two soldiers stepped forward and passed a thong around young Shakespeare's arms, while the released yokel fell sobbing at his feet.

In the group about Queen Elizabeth was a handsome young maid of honour who looked to be but scarcely out of her teens, and whose proud beauty and haughty bearing marked her as a person high in royal favour.

She had sat on her horse, a silent witness to the discomfiture of the serving-man, but when the youth had stepped forward with his plea for justice a flush of admiration for his bravery arose to her cheek and her eyes never left his face while he was speaking. At the action of the Queen her lip curled in a sneer of disgust, and as the bearers prepared to raise the palanquin she seemed of a sudden to hit upon some

decision, and shortening her horse's rein she pressed close to the side of Elizabeth, crying:

"Your Majesty, a boon; I crave this young man's life!"

"Anne Hathaway, you impudent hussy!" fairly shrieked the angry Queen, "how dare you interfere when once the royal word is passed? Get back to your place or I will dismiss you from my service."

"Your Majesty," persisted the brave maiden, "this is my birth-morn, and you told me but yesternight that any favour I might ask of you on this day would be freely granted"; and she shot an encouraging glance at young Shakespeare, who brightened perceptibly at the ray of hope, and whose eyes looked with fervent admiration upon her handsome face.

"You are a bold minx, Anne," said Elizabeth, the storm in her brow showing signs of clearing, "but you speak truth. I had forgotten my promise; but what crazy whim has entered your foolish head I am at a loss to understand. You might have had a pearl necklace, and you ask only the life of a country churl. Have a care, lass, I promised but one boon. If I grant his life you must forego the bawd."

"I am agreed, your Majesty. He is a comely lad and his features denote a gentle birth. 'Twould be a shame to deface the highway with his withering body."

"Anne Hathaway, I will come to the belief that you are a fool. Has this country air turned your head? We will transform this hanging into a wedding and impress my Lord Bishop's services to join you to this hero of yours if you persist in your admiration. Though it seems somewhat out of

place that you should be smitten with a boy apparently some five years your junior. My Lord Hatton, what do you counsel? Shall we remit sentence upon this prisoner?"

The tall and handsome courtier thus addressed bowed with infinite grace, replying to his Queen:

"Your Majesty holds the power of life and death o'er her subjects, and I would not presume to interfere, though I would deem it but just to visit punishment upon this bold offender." He evidently proposed to advance a further argument in favor of hanging the boy, but he caught the eye of Anne Hathaway fixed upon him in a disdainful stare and he stopped abruptly in evident confusion, while the Queen, her good humor fully restored by his embarrassment, laughed heartily.

"My Lord," she said, "you fain would remove a rival from your path. Methinks you need have no fear of this uncultured youth. And now as I have had my laugh my temper inclines to mercy. Anne, your boon is granted, on condition that you loose his bonds yourself. Make haste, lass, or my fury will break loose again at this delay."

The maid of honour's haughty face was o'erspread with a flush of shame, but she accepted the conditions mutely and tossed her bridle to Sir Amias Paulet, who assisted her to dismount. She walked silently to the prisoner's side, and taking a knife from the girdle of one of his guards stepped quickly behind him and cut the thongs that bound his wrists, then dropping the knife to the ground turned on her heel and moved toward the Queen.

With a quick step forward the lad reached her side, and dropping upon one knee seized her hand, which he kissed once with an air of gratefulness and grace that appealed to the Queen, then releasing her he fell back to his former station as she passed on to her horse and was assisted to remount.

Elizabeth clapped her hands. "Well done, Master Shakespeare; I am glad we did not hang thee," she said, as for the third time she gave orders for the royal train to move on.

As the bearers shouldered the palanquin and the gorgeous cavalcade passed on the dusty highway, the two lads stood by the carcass of their deer and gazed in dumb amazement at the lordly show, their hearts full of gratitude for their providential escape.

Young Shakespeare saw one form alone in all the throng—that of the maid who had saved his life. She rode on one side of the highway and ne'er looked back, and his heart sank within him. As they reached the bend of the road, however, which would soon screen them from view, she turned in the saddle and raised one gauntleted hand in a gesture of farewell, while some white object gently fluttered to the ground.

When they had vanished around the bend he ran quickly down the road and saw a little satin bow from the Lady Anne's sleeve lying in the dust. He seized it eagerly and thrust it in the bosom of his jerkin, then returning to where he had left his companion he found him on his knees by the deer, offering up fervent thanks for their miraculous preservation.

CHAPTER II

ROGER "UNDER COVER"

Close by the famous battle-ground of Naseby there bubbles forth a tiny rivulet, which ripples o'er the pebbles and seeks the larger rocks beneath. Its gentle murmur is changed to joyous laughter as it splashes on its way, with ever-broadening current, forming, long ere it reaches the borders of Northamptonshire, a mighty river-bed, whose waters flow on with majestic sweep and many a graceful turn through Warwickshire, Worcester and Gloucester, past the towns of Rugby, Warwick, Stratford and Evesham; and whose noble stream empties itself into the muddy Severn at Tewksbury. It is the historic Avon. It divides the County Warwick in two irregular sections. The region to the north, covered with majestic woods, the dwelling-places of innumerable wild birds and animals of the forest, is named Arden; while to the south, stretching away as far as the eye can reach, the level meads of Feldon furnish rich pasture to the lowing herds that are constantly at graze on their fertile soil.

The mail road and the Queen's highway from Chester to London crosses the Avon at the ancient ford, which was spanned centuries ago by Hugh Clopton's magnificent bridge of fourteen enormous

arches, through which may be seen the picturesque gables and the pretty streets of the ancient town of Stratford.

The purlieus of the forest of Arden are held in free usage by the tenants of the shire, though the park proper is set aside to the Crown, and innumerable keepers enforce Her Majesty's laws, and see that the yeomanry do not o'erstray their proper bounds.

For long after the wholesome lesson taught them by their narrow escape from the judgment of the wrathful Queen, young Master Shakespeare and his man, John Hallam, confined their rambles to the banks of the Avon and the borders of the forest, and if they hunted game, were careful to keep within the confines of the law.

Their bows were frequently left behind, and many a day was spent contentedly lying under the trees on the shore of the beautiful river and recounting their impressions of the wonderful event that had engraved itself so deeply upon their youthful brains, and discussing the various personages in Elizabeth's train.

Full many a sigh the young man heaved at thought of the royal maid who had so bravely interfered to save his neck, and one pleasant afternoon as John sat fishing on the river bank his master paced restlessly o'er the soft turf, occasionally frowning and muttering to himself. At length he turned upon the yokel with an eager query:

"John, dost think I will ever set eyes on her again?"

"Who? The Queen?" grunted John, as he eagerly awaited the result of a promising nibble at his newly baited hook.

"No, stupid; her beautiful maid of honour, whom we have to thank for our presence here to-day."

"How should I know, Master Willum? You have frightened the fishes with your gabbling, and we will like return empty-handed. You are sure bewitched with her prettiness. 'Ur be ever on your tongue."

"Oh, never mind the fish. Did you ever see a play-actor, John?"

"Nay, but I have heard tell of their doings. They must be most wondrous folk."

"I did witness a production once at Oxford, John; my father went there on some business of the wool, and I accompanied him; it was the mayor's show, and I will ne'er forget its fascination. I remember as though it were yesterday the speech and gestures of the famous actors."

"Aye, master, 'tis said they image gnomes and fairies, and in their private doings are even unlike common folk."

"They are a people to themselves, John. They live in an atmosphere of romance which sweetens and attunes their daily lives. Ah! Would I belonged to their guild! I feel that I might e'en become a famous man in time, but it is not to be thought of. They say that it does take most powerful influence at court to become attached to their merry crew in even the most humble station. The lords and ladies are their patrons, and they rub

shoulders with the nobility when they do play at Windsor. 'Tis hinted that some few are e'en of noble birth."

"You will see many of them, Master Willum, when you go to London to pursue your studies."

"No doubt, John. No doubt I will. But I am all in a fear and tremble at thought of visiting the great city. One moment I would go and the next my heart sinks within me at prospect of leaving the greenwood and our beloved river. Then again I am on fire with eagerness, for I will study the languages and learn the latest modes of composition and of etiquette, and in time I may become a tutor of these arts, and earn fair income in the instruction of the neighboring youths."

He threw himself on his back on the green sward and lay thus for long, his thoughts carrying him in fancied flights to the realms of the unreal and into the company of the dwellers of stage-land. John reclined on his elbow, blinking lazily, forgetful of the fish, the river, and the woods; the only vision that disturbed his mind being the anticipation of a hearty supper upon their return.

Suddenly young Shakespeare arose and struck an attitude before the astonished man-servant.

"Listen, John," he said; "I have thought up some lines anent our river. Tell me if they fall pleasantly on thine ear."

With the rays of the sinking sun lighting his handsome face, and with gestures of exquisite grace as his accompaniment, he began:

"Lovely Avon,
Gently flowing
'Neath thy drooping willows green;
'Tween thy banks
The sunset glowing
On thy bosom's silver sheen.
Cool retreats
For patient anglers
Dot thy undulating shore;
Countless fowl,
In wooing couples,
Skim thy placid surface o'er.

"In thy sylvan
Shaded purlieus
Timid harts, a-tremble stand,
Fearsome of
The cruel poacher's
Arrow and death-dealing hand.
When the shadows
Steal upon thee,
Silent, they approach thy brink,
Noble antlers
Bowing o'er thee,
'Suaging thirst in cooling drink.

"Life is ever
Like thy current,
Flowing onward to the sea;
Deeps and narrows,
Pools and shallows
Ending in Eternity.
Noble Avon,
Mighty lesson
To the frivolous and gay,
Steadfast ever,
Fickle never,
Faith in thy appointed way."

As he finished, he stood with hand uplifted, and looked at John, who sat with mouth hung open, enthralled by the rhythm of his master's poetry.

"Well, lad, what is your judgment? Is it an apt description?" asked the youth.

"Ah, master, your head is ever filled with beautiful verses. Surely no play-actor could recite or make them better."

"Your commendation is pleasing, John. If I could have such as you ever for my audiences my fame might be assured. But there are critics in this world who do but make or mar a man, and 'tis said their favour is most hard to gain. But I will soon unsatisfy myself with this dreaming. Let us get back to earth again and wend our way homeward ere the deepening shadows plunge the woods in darkness."

John picked up his pole and the lads set out briskly on their journey home. By the time they reached the highway the twilight was draping the forest in its somber mantle, and they stopped for a moment to draw breath ere proceeding on the final stage. As they were about to resume their march they were startled suddenly by the sound of a deep groan, which apparently issued from a clump of brush at the side of the road. They grasped each other in their terror, while they felt the hair rise upon their heads.

"'Tis a Wull o' the Wisp," whispered John. "'Twould draw us into its clutches out of pity for its plight."

"Nay, John," said his master, "methinks it has a human sound; let us be wary."

Again the groan was repeated, and young Shakespeare hesitated no longer, but shaking off John's

restraining clutch, plunged into the bushes, and in a moment called loudly for his companion to attend him.

The yokel, reassured, hastened to his master's side, and found him bending over the figure of a man who lay in a semi-conscious state a few yards from the side of the road. In the dim light they saw a deep gash on the man's temple, from which the blood was oozing, and the features, such as could be seen through a scraggly growth of beard, were turned a deathly white.

"John, he is sorely wounded. I doubt if we can revive him. Is there any water left in your flagon?"

"Aye, master, 'tis half full," answered John, handing Shakespeare the bottle.

The youth dashed part of its contents in the injured man's face, and forcing the neck of the flask between his lips, poured the balance into his mouth. He gasped and coughed weakly, and presently his eyes opened, and he endeavored to raise his body to his elbow, sputtering and gagging to rid himself of the reviving fluid.

"Faith, 'tis a bad business," said he, in a weak voice. "Who may you be, young masters, and where do I lie in this sorry plight?"

"On the Arden road, hard by the town of Stratford," answered Will Shakespeare. "How came you in this distress? Were you fallen upon by highwaymen?"

"Nay. I had a tussle with two of the Queen's mounted keepers, and broke one fellow's head with my hanger. I leapt upon his horse and galloped off as though the Devil were after me, but his com-

panion was too much concerned with the other's difficulty, and I got away beautifully, and was laughing to myself at thought of their beefy figures riding double, when my spavined nag stumbled in a rut in the highway, and I flew off over his head and remember nothing more until I saw your friendly faces, and felt your beastly liquor trickling down my parched throat."

"Why, 'twas nothing but pure water," said Shakespeare, "from John Hallam's flagon."

"Aye. I repeat, 'tis beastly. Water rots your jack-boots, what will it do to your stomach?" he growled, as he weakly sank back on the turf. "Oh! if I had a foaming tankard of ale now, I'd soon be on my legs again."

"My man will assist you to your feet, and together we may guide you to my father's house, where you can find a retreat until your wound is healed."

The man turned his head toward the youth, and his eyes opened in wonderment.

"Young sir," he said, "you are of a confiding nature. You go my warrant without questioning who or what I am."

"'Tis enough that you are badly wounded and in need of immediate attention," said the lad, as he bound his kerchief round the poor fellow's throbbing brow.

"Nathless, I will not so ill reward your kindness. My name is Roger Covert, though I am better known to my boon companions by the title of Roger 'Under Cover,' in consequence of my many secret escapades and dare-devil exploits, though I have always succeeded in obscuring my identity and thus

escaping the consequences of my acts. Of late, however, I have fallen upon evil fortune. Three months back I belonged to Sir Walter Raleigh's company of guardsmen, and ruffled it with the bravest of them. But the wine-cup got the best of me, and after repeatedly warning me, my captain at last stripped me of my uniform and turned me out of the service. The taverns soon absorbed my meager stock of coin; I became ragged and desperate and was like to have starved were it not for my poaching on the Queen's preserves, in which act I have but now come so near to losing my liberty and life. I am a rogue, a vagabond, what you will, but Roger Covert has never yet violated a friend's hospitality. You had best leave me to my fate."

His eyes closed and he sighed wearily, too far gone to care if life or death claimed him.

"Nay, my man, 'twould be inhuman. But you have spoken overmuch for one in your condition. We must get you to the house as soon as possible."

So saying, with John's help he lifted Covert to his feet; but the wounded guardsman was so weakened by the loss of blood that this sudden exertion caused him to reel and fall in a dead faint in Hallam's arms. Although he was a man of more than medium height, and of sturdy build, the giant yokel lifted him up as though he were a child, and calling to his master to hurry on and prepare a resting-place for their patient, he strode swiftly along the highway, nor paused to rest until he had deposited his burden on a mattress in John Shakespeare's abode.

A raging fever ensued as a result of the wound, and for a fortnight Roger Covert tossed upon his couch, and his life trembled in the balance. In his ravings he was back with his old comrades under Raleigh, and his faithful nurses, William and the serving-man, heard fragments of many strange adventures that fell from his unknowing lips. At one time he fought a duel with rapiers in the dim morning light, at another he held secret meeting with some dainty damsel of the court; again, at the Mermaid Inn, he joined his companions in drinking-bouts and swaggering tales of conquests in the town.

All this Shakespeare drank in with eager ears, and envied the fellow his knowledge of London and the court, while a half-formed plan, which he hardly dared to foster, took root in his brain.

At last the fever broke and Roger Covert lay on his bed, a shadowy wreck of a man, but with the light of reason in his eyes. As he gradually convalesced he became strangely quiet, and answered the questions of his watchers with a nod of his head or a reply in monosyllables.

At the end of a month he was on his feet and able to walk about the grounds. His health and strength were fast returning and he determined to encroach no longer on the hospitality of his benefactors. He was debating how to slip away without seeming too ungrateful, when he saw William and his father approaching him, while the young man was dis-coursing eagerly, and evidently pleading for some concession from his parent.

"Master Covert," said John Shakespeare, "you have been in London, my lad informs me."

"Full many a time, kind sir, and it is a most noble city."

"Are you acquaint with one John Florio, a teacher of the languages?"

"A famous scholar. I know him by reputation only."

"William journeys to London next month to place himself under the tutelage of this noted instructor. He had intended taking John Hallam with him as his serving-man, but since your advent in our household he has been beseeching me to engage you as his squire, and has been dinging your praises in my ears. What think you? Would it content you to serve him in such capacity?"

"Master Shakespeare, your kindness overwhelms me. I am a roystering vagabond, a lack-wit, a bibulous knave, unfit to keep him company, and by reason of this late begotten scar, too villainous of feature to ride in his fair presence."

"Withal, Master Covert, there is an honest twinkle in your eye, and I think we may depend upon your faith. How say you now? Do you accept or no?"

"With all my heart! and if ever honest man arose from swaggering villain, such transformation will now ensue. By my knowledge of the pot-houses and drinking-dens of wicked London, I will keep him free of them; by my gratitude to a country squire for his helping hand to an ill-deserving wretch, I will serve him faithfully; I will see that he is neither cheated nor abused, I will ride with him, I will carry for him, and I will fight for him, Master Shakespeare, if need arise; and if ever it be his fortune to come to court, through my knowledge

of the weaknesses of many of the noble lords and ladies I may yet do him a good turn."

"Spoken like a man, Roger Covert, and here is my hand to our bargain."

The dishonoured guardsman bent low to hide his tears of gratitude, as their hands met in a hearty clasp, and William could scarcely conceal his delight at the happy achievement of his hopes.

They were soon deeply engrossed in discussing their plans for the future, and Roger was holding forth on the advantages of equipping themselves lightly as to clothing and purse, and heavily as to weapons of defense while on the road, in view of the attacks of plundering highwaymen, when they were most strenuously interrupted by weird and blatant noises that arose from the neighborhood of the kitchen.

They ran thence in great alarm, and threw open the door, only to see John Hallam sitting in the middle of the floor and blubbering as if his heart would break, for the poor fellow had overheard his master's conversation with Roger, and the realization that he would have to forego the coveted trip to London was the first real sorrow that he had ever experienced in all his simple life.

CHAPTER III

AN INCIDENT ON THE OLD ROMAN ROAD

The Romans, in their early occupation of England, unwittingly constructed, in the shape of broad highways and wide road-beds, more lasting monuments to their undying fame and the extent of their conquests than any of the miraculous works of art that grace the Pantheon, or after being covered by centuries of ooze at the bottom of the ancient River Tiber, have been brought to light, in crumbling fragments, by the efforts of the modern archæologist. Even to the present day these marvelous ways, in perfect state of preservation, traverse the Isle in many directions, and no doubt will furnish to ages of posterity easy methods of travel through the fertile shires.

In Warwickshire, the very heart of the Midlands, is formed the junction of three of these great roads, the arms of two of them extending from Dover to Chester on the one side, and from Totnes to Lincoln on the other, while the southern road runs through Stratford, and across the great Avon Bridge, thence southeast, fording many lesser streams, but stretching steadily onward until it reaches its terminus, the Queen's great city of London.

One gray morning, late in the month of September, two horsemen set forth from the town of Stratford and took the southern road. They walked their horses over the arches of the Clopton Bridge, and arriving at its middle span, halted and turned in their saddles, looking back at the picturesque village, and at the humble home, in front of which John and Mistress Shakespeare and the faithful John Hallam were waving them a sad farewell. They doffed their caps, then turned and spurred their horses on, and several miles had sped behind them ere either felt inclined to break the silence.

They were well mounted. The elder man, who was our friend Roger Covert, was plainly attired in brown jerkin and hose, with cap of the same color, in which was jauntily fastened a white cock's feather. A heavy sword dangled at his side and in his belt were stuck two monstrous pistols, which he had insisted upon purchasing when they were outfitting for the journey. He bestrode a large black horse whose deep chest and clean-cut limbs gave evidence of much speed and endurance. His companion and master, young Will Shakespeare, was dressed in a suit of silver gray, and rode a roan horse of smaller body though no less swift-footed than Covert's steed. He wore a rapier, which seemed rather for show than defense, and a single-barreled pistol was stuck in the holster of his saddle.

They had skirted Edge Hill and had crossed the boundary of Warwickshire, when Roger laid his hand upon his master's rein and drew the galloping horses to a trot.

"Master Will," said he, "a swift start makes a long journey. We must proceed at a more even gait or the horses will be spent ere the first stage is ended."

"I was far away in the kingdom of my thoughts, Roger, and I noted not how fast we sped. I was wondering how I would fare in busy London, and my mind dwelt also on the forest of Arden where I spent so many happy hours. I fear a country-bred youth like myself will be sadly out of place midst the culture and graces of a great city."

"Nay, Master Will, you lack but one quality to make you a famous courtier. You are handsome of feature and form and bear yourself most gracefully, and have a gentle manner, but that very gentleness is your own worst enemy. 'Tis the overbearing, ruffling, swaggering gentleman of fortune that wins high place near the person of the Queen. The timid gallant is soon drowned in the sea of his own modesty. You must cultivate a bluffer manner, which I've no doubt you'll do ere six months of London environment have passed, and I warrant you that you'll pass muster with the best of them."

"You fill me with strange hopes, Roger. If only at some future day I might become attached to the royal court, and be of some slight service to the Queen, I would be proud indeed. Ah! you must have had many encounters and love passages with the fair ladies of the royal household."

"'Twere hardly a common guardsman's privilege to aspire so high," answered Covert, "but in my time, I warrant you, I have set a-flutter the hearts and hopes of a few dainty damsels of lower station.

There was one, however, a certain Anne Holcombe, but recently appointed as laundress to the Queen, a beauty with rosy cheeks and flashing eyes, and lips—ah! that I might sip the honey of those ruby lips! I was sore smitten and she favored me 'bove all others of the guard, and I was well encouraged to press my suit, when my own captain unsuited me, and in disgrace I left the court. I think there is a tenderness in her heart for me even yet, and if ever fate does throw me in royal company again, I will lay bold siege to the citadel of her love. Heigho! we had best look alive, or all our simmering hopes will be let out of our carcasses by the bullet of some plundering highwayman."

"Do they infest this part of the countryside, Roger?" asked Shakespeare as he glanced timidly over his shoulder.

"Aye. They come and go. Dost see that moss-grown oak hard by the roadside?" he asked as he pointed to a giant tree some forty rods ahead. "'Twas the favourite pillaging place of a robber whom they called 'Trotting Dick.' He would calmly await his victims behind its trunk, and as a coach containing some rich and gouty merchant and his women-folk would approach, he'd ride him forth, and with pistol at aim would compel the frightened post-boys to rein up their nags. With many a jibe for the gent and a courteous jest for the ladies, he would relieve them of their wealth, and 'tis said no hiding-place was sacred to him. With sweeping gesture and low bow to the dames he would thank them for their 'charity,' and mounting his horse would trot slowly away, until lost to sight in the

dust of the highway, and never once would deign to turn his head, though many a shot was fired after him by his angry prey. Jack Ketch got him at last, through this same failing of his, and though he was badly wounded, he was made to ripen as fruit of the gallows-tree."

As they passed the oak Shakespeare shuddered and half expected to see some ale-blown knight of the road ride forth; but nothing occurred to disturb the harmony of the scene and they rode on and on, past many a pretty hamlet and lonely farm, while Roger entertained him with stories of the road and showed him many points of historic interest, which he viewed with eager eyes.

They were yet some dozen miles from the town of Chipping, when Shakespeare's horse stumbled and pulled up somewhat lame.

Roger dismounted, and found a stone in the animal's hoof, which he removed; and as he knelt for a moment in the dust, saw something that caused him to give a low whistle of surprise.

"What ails you, Roger?" asked the youth.

"See, Master Will, the broad marks in the roadway. Some gallant coach has passed within the hour. I wonder who of the nobility does ride abroad. The wide imprint of the wheels bespeaks a heavy equipage."

He remounted, and they rode slowly forward and up a long rise that led to the summit of a rocky knoll. Just as they reached the top the loud report of a pistol fell upon their ears and startled their horses, and as they looked down the road, which fell in a rapid incline to the valley below, they saw a splendid

coach and four, one of whose leaders lay upon the ground in a snorting and kicking heap, while his companions had become sadly entangled in the traces in their struggles to avoid his hoofs. A villainous-appearing horseman held a pistol at the head of the foremost post-boy while his two ruffianly companions reined their horses up at the door of the coach.

With Roger Covert to witness was to act, and with a mighty shout of "To the rescue!" he drew a pistol from his belt, sank spurs into his horse's flanks, and thundered madly down the hill. Shakespeare's horse followed of his own accord an instant later, for the youth was too alarmed to know what he did, and soon was close upon his companion's flying heels.

Ere the robbers realized that reinforcements had arrived the rescuers were upon them, and, with a furious oath, Roger discharged his pistol at their leader's head. The ball sped true and he dropped, a mass of carrion in the roadway. His companions, at sight of this disaster, turned tail and fled at full speed on the highway, with their riderless horse rushing after them in a panic of fear.

Roger thrust his smoking pistol in Shakespeare's hand, and saying, "Await me here, Master Will," drew his sword and galloped in pursuit of the fleeing villains.

As the youth sat his horse, too perplexed to reckon on his future movements, the heavy door of the coach swung open, and an elegant gentleman stepped out upon the roadway. He was tall, of commanding presence, and his curling brown locks, small mustachio and pointed beard, barbered in the latest style affected at court, and his clothing of rich silken

texture, heavily bedecked with embroidery and rare lace, proclaimed him to be of the nobility. He seemed to be scarce thirty-five years old, though in truth he was near fifty. He advanced toward the lad, a kindly light shining in his eye, and holding out his hand, he addressed his rescuer:

"Young master, I owe you my life," he said, "and offer you a thousand thanks for your opportune arrival and your brave rescue. Methinks those rascals had greater designs upon me than the mere pillage of my purse. There are one or two of my friends at court would give a pretty penny to have me removed from their path. But indeed you are a gallant youth, the odds were long against you."

"Noble sir," said the lad, "'twas not my hand that compassed their confusion. Their flight was due to the bravery of my companion, who still pursues the two escaping thieves."

"'Pon my faith you have a seemly modesty."

"I have more fear than modesty, my Lord, for I am all of a tremble at our narrow escape."

"And a courtly wit," smiled the nobleman. "I would there were more like you at the court of the Protestant Queen. First you, a mere stripling, do let out the brains of a pothering varlet, and then you do most strenuously deny the deed, though you still hold the smoking weapon in your hand."

"Nay, sir; Covert killed the man," protested the boy.

"Tut! tut! Let us drop the farce. You've saved my life and shall not go unrewarded. Whither do you journey?"

"To London, sir, to pursue my studies with Master Florio."

"A worthy teacher, patronized by the nobility. What is your name?"

"Master William Shakespeare; at your service, sir."

"Well, Master Shakespeare, belike I may do you a good turn some day. Can you keep a trust?"

"If you command me, sir."

"Then, my lad, you must first know that I am Lord Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Nay, nay! my lad, keep on your cap. I am at the head of an organization banded together for the purpose of protecting the person of Her Royal Highness from the attacks of conspirators. Some of the mightiest nobles of England are in my ranks. At the court a score of our company attend the Queen's every movement, though without exciting the suspicions of the ignorant courtiers. Our agents are distributed throughout the broad land, and many an incipient plot is nipped in the bud, and the intending assassins executed without understanding how they were discovered. Two persons only, the Queen and myself, hold the power of conferring membership. 'Twill promote your interest mightily to be within our ranks if you should ever come to court. What say you? Will you join us?"

Master Shakespeare nigh fell off his horse in his joy at his good fortune.

"My Lord," said he, "it is a great honour for one so humble. But I fear my studies will suffer in consequence."

"Nay, you need only to keep your ears open. We will not require active service of you; you have already served your Queen in saving my life to-day."

He then administered an oath of secrecy to Shakespeare, and continued:

"Our society is called the Order of the Mailed Hand, and our watchword is 'The Queen's Life.' By our rules we are all equal. In this brotherhood of ours you will rank with the highest noble on its roll." He removed a jeweled badge from his wide collar, and showed it to the lad. "This is our insignia," he said. "See, the gauntlet-encased hand grasping the wrist of the naked one which holds an unsheathed dagger. So we will ward off, if need be, the attacks of vile plotters upon our Queen. 'Tis a pretty bauble, and the unknowing ones will credit its possession to your vanity. Wear it always, my lad. It may carry you to many a high place, and through deadly peril, and your comrades will ever extend you a welcome and helping hand."

As he finished he stepped to the youth's side and pinned the token upon his sleeve, laughing merrily at the profuse thanks of the grateful recipient.

Meanwhile the post-boys had, with considerable difficulty, straightened out the tangled trappings, had unhitched the horses from the coach, tying them to trees at the side of the road, and dragged the dead animal off the highway. They went through the lifeless robber's pouch, which, to their disgust, was empty, and they tumbled him unceremoniously into a ditch, after one of them had secured his pistol.

As Leicester turned his eye upon them they were looking ruefully at the three horses, and wondering

how they were to continue their journey without abandoning the heavy coach.

"This is indeed a predicament," said the Earl. "If we could only get to Chipping I would rest over a day and procure fresh horses. I am loath to abandon my conveyance."

"Take my horse, and welcome, my Lord," said Shakespeare. "My companion, I hope, will soon overtake us, and we may resume our journey at the town."

"If I mistake not, he is coming now," said Dudley, screening his eyes and pointing to where a cloud of dust was appearing over the top of the knoll. "And may the pest seize me, but he has captured a prize!" he shouted joyfully, as Roger hove in sight, galloping hard and leading the dead highwayman's horse by his bridle.

As he drew rein in front of the coach he leapt to the ground, and as, for the first time, he caught sight of the nobleman's face, he jerked his cap from his head and stood speechless in the road.

Dudley looked at him for a moment with a twinkle in his eye.

"You are that hero upon whom our young friend places all the credit of this adventure. Have we not met before, in different surroundings?"

Roger Covert hung his head, but answered not.

"Methinks the last time I laid eyes upon you was some three months gone, when I saw Walter Raleigh strip the Queen's uniform from your back. Do I speak truth?"

"Yes, my Lord," was the humble answer.

"And since then your beauty has not increased; you have a most wicked scar. Dost still adhere to thy love for the flowing bowl?"

"My Lord, my throat has been as barren of liquor as the desert is of moisture, since entering Master Shakespeare's service."

"He speaks truth, my Lord," said the lad.

"Covert," continued his Lordship, "I held thee a drunken scoundrel, but now I know that you are a brave man. When your young master can spare you, come to me and I will use my influence with Sir Walter to have you reinstated in your old company of the guards. 'Tis wonderful what change a lapse from prosperity may work in a man."

Roger stammered his thanks, and would have fallen upon his knees and kissed the noble's hand, but Leicester waved him away, saying:

"Reserve your devotions for the damsels of the court. We will trade our patronage for your prize. Is it a bargain? My intercession with Raleigh in exchange for the horse."

He laughingly took the animal's bridle, and calling one of the post-boys, ordered him to hitch it in the dead one's place, and to make haste, that they might resume their journey.

"You may attend us as far as the town," he said, turning to Shakespeare, "where I will rest me for a time. No doubt you will be eager to push on to London from there. I will go by slower stages, and I hope that, in case of another attack by highwaymen, I will be equally fortunate in the appearance of a rescuing party. Though I will take warning and double my guard." As he turned to enter the

waiting coach he stepped close to Will Shakespeare, and whispered a brief sentence in his ear, "For 'The Queen's Life,'" then with a laugh he crossed the step and shut the heavy door, and soon the party was moving briskly along toward the old town.

When they arrived at Chipping the post-boys guided their horses to the royal hostelry, and Leicester invited his companions to rest and refresh themselves ere they continued their journey. He bade them a hearty farewell, and left them in the tap-room, going upstairs to an apartment that had been prepared in expectation of his arrival, and where a bounteous repast was soon conveyed to him.

As Shakespeare and Covert sat at a table and regaled themselves with foaming ale and a delicious pasty, Roger caught sight of the jewel that adorned his master's arm. He said nothing at first, but finally his curiosity got the best of him.

"Where got you the pretty medal, Master Will? Did Robert Dudley give it to you?"

"Aye, as a mark of his favour," answered the lad, as he saw that the badge had no significance in his companion's eyes.

"Ah, Master Shakespeare, this morning's work was a lucky stroke of business for both of us. 'Tis a rare and wonderful thing to be under the patronage of the Queen's favourite."

CHAPTER IV

THE DOMICIL OF FLORIO

When they had stayed their stomachs, and had given their faithful horses a measure of oats, Shakespeare and Roger Covert gaily set forth upon the road, letting their steeds have free rein while they discussed their wonderful encounter with the robbers, of which their heads and hearts were full.

"Ah, Master Will, it was marvelous the way you let daylight into the highwayman's skull," laughed Roger, slyly winking at his companion. "I warned you once that you were too modest; you should have taken full credit for the deed."

"And in that case what would have become of your appointment in Sir Walter's guards?" quickly retorted Shakespeare.

"Aye, 'tis true enough, Master Will. You have me there. I will plague you no more, but will most humbly tender my thanks for your honesty, and crave your pardon for my forwardness."

"'Tis freely granted, Roger. 'Twas a lucky happening when we found you wounded by the road, for what would have fared me to-day were John Hallam my squire? I cannot bear to think on it. I can see the poor booby dropping off his horse at sound of the pistol, and falling on his knees in the

dust to say his prayers, while I dare not picture my own fright. I was sadly demoralized until you set me a pattern by your ready wit and your brave rush to the rescue."

"I simply followed the old motto of my company, 'He who strikes first wins the day,' and gave the varlets no time to prepare against our onset."

They rode on in peace until late in the afternoon, when they saw the spires and gables of Oxford in the distance.

"We will rest there to-night," said Roger, "and I trust we may find accommodation for ourselves and horses. I will spur me on ahead, that I may arrange for it with mine host of the inn."

He galloped forward swiftly, and Shakespeare followed at a leisurely pace. As he rode up to the tavern he heard loud voices in angry debate, and saw several handsome steeds tethered to the hitching-post.

"Confound you, old pottle-nose!" he heard Covert shout, "I care not how many earls or churls you have under your roof. I seek accommodation for an honest gentleman and his servant, and, by the gods, you'll squeeze us in, and give us a capon and a bumper, or I'll spit you on my good sword, you reeking wine-sop, and baste you in your own ale over the kitchen fire!"

"Ho, ho! Not so fast, young fire-eater," said the fat and waddling landlord; "it takes two to make a bargain. I've told you my house is full. What ho! inside there! I'll set the earl's attendants upon you and have you soundly drubbed and run out of the township."

At sound of his clatter a handsome young lad appeared in the doorway, holding a mug of ale in his hand, and smacking his lips, while three burly soldiers followed at his heels.

"What the Devil is the meaning of all this babbling, landlord? I thought you were being eaten alive by the way you bawled and sputtered."

"Your Grace," said the inn-keeper, bowing low, "this surly fellow insists upon being bedded and boarded, though I have assured him thrice that my house is full. Set your men upon him, that we may be rid of his presence."

"That would be a trifle severe, Master Weaver. Let him go his way in peace; though stay, if he would sleep upon the floor we might spare him a bite and a sup from our table."

At this the landlord cringed and bowed, and Shakespeare rode hastily forward, saying:

"We crave no better fare, sir, and will be grateful indeed if we may be allowed to rest here over night, as we resume our journey at sunrise."

During his speech the young nobleman had been eyeing him curiously, and as a ray of the setting sun fell athwart his sleeve, he dropped his ale-cup and rushed forward, seizing Will by the hand as he said in a low voice, "I see that you ride also for 'The Queen's Life,' and secretly turning back a fold of his cuff, he displayed to Shakespeare's view a jeweled counterpart of Leicester's token; then turning to the landlord, he shouted:

"Make haste, you fat varlet, and put a fresh roast upon the spit, and broach a keg of your best ale.

These are my guests and this gentleman will share my own apartment over night, while his man will sup with my attendants."

The travelers gladly dismounted, while the landlord waddled into the tavern, shouting his orders to the servants; and a stupid choreboy ran out to look after the horses.

"The charm is in truth a wonder-worker," thought young Shakespeare, as he followed the lad into the tavern.

An hour later they sat at table in the best room of the inn, and with the healthy appetites of youth discussed the savory viands of Master Weaver's larder.

The young man tilted back his chair and raised a foaming mug of ale on high, saying:

"My friend, I pledge thee to our better acquaintance." Then, as he tossed off the contents, he continued, "I am Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, successor to my father's title upon his recent death, and on my road to London from a visit to a kinsman in this neighborhood."

"And my name is William Shakespeare," said the other, "of Stratford-on-Avon, and I travel also to the city, where I expect to spend the next two years under the roof of Master John Florio."

"By Gad, we are well met then!" shouted Wriothesley, as he struck the table a sounding blow with his clenched fist. "'Tis the very tag and purpose of my own journey. My education is to be completed at John Florio's hands, and you will bear me company on the way, and we will be comrades at the school."

The happy youth jumped up from his seat and capered about the room, and in the exuberance of his boyish spirits fairly embraced his newly found and somewhat shyer friend.

"Why, until now," he said, "I held my sojourn there in deepest dread; but we will have a merry time together and somewhat atone for the rigors of our daily tasks. We will find another member of our society at the pedagogue's—young Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex. I received a post from him, telling me that he was soon to go to court, as his lessons were near finished, and I was bemoaning my advent amongst strangers, when suddenly my gloom is dissipated by your fortunate arrival."

"Even I am almost a stranger to you," said Shakespeare.

"Nonsense! Do you not belong to our brotherhood, the strongest organization in Her Majesty's realm? And that aside, your gentle features and modest carriage do command the fullest limits of my confidence."

"And it will not be violated, your Grace," heartily responded his auditor.

"Away with all titles! I tell you we rank as equals in our common cause. Hereafter you will name me Henry, and I shall call you Will, and for that matter I know you will far surpass me in our studies at the school, for I do most mightily hate the look and tone of written tablets. My head is full of nature, and of the love of life and trees and flowers, of pretty girls, and babbling brooks, and I fear the restrictions of the school-room will

greatly irk me, though I know I will take kindly to the instruction of the foils and the duello."

"The reading of the languages will better suit me," said Will. "I have long had much desire to study the poetry of the Italian tongue."

"Aye, but a man must learn also to defend himself if he would tarry long at court. In these days of intrigue and deceit one never knows when he may fall the victim of some sudden attack, that he may clear the way for a jealous rival's advance to fame and fortune. A ready wit and a quick eye, backed up by some slight knowledge of the sword, will keep a man longer alive than the foul-tasting potions of a philandering chirurgeon."

"You are right, Henry," agreed his friend, "we must become proficient in all the branches. The evil attacks of slanderous tongues are often voided of stings by adroit answers. But in case such course should fail, 'tis well to have a good sword hand to rely upon."

The lads lingered over their meal until late at night, making joyous plans for the future, and it was only the thought of an early start in the morning that caused them to seek their pallets, where they slept soundly until awakened by the lusty voice of Covert, ere the sun had dissipated the gray shadows of the September dawn.

"Come, my masters, a steaming brew awaits you. Arise and robe yourselves. We have a long stretch to ride before we reach the London gate," he shouted, and clattered down the stairs to feed the horses and saddle them for the journey.

In the uncertain morning light the party set forth upon the road, the Earl and Will Shakespeare riding side by side, while Roger and the young nobleman's attendants followed at a respectful distance.

The day passed without further incident to break the tedium of their march. They traveled slowly, passing through constantly busier scenes; stopped for a brief rest at Great Marlow, and for refreshment for both man and beast at Uxbridge, and traversed the final stage of their journey picking their way through the hurrying crowds of horsemen and foot passengers that filled the road in the County Middlesex, and arriving late in the afternoon at High Gate, the famous portal of the great city of London.

They halted and surveyed the enormous metropolis, stretching far away to the southeast, its myriad spires and gables appearing to their astounded view in an endless sea of architecture.

"'Tis a noble city, Will," said Wriothesley; "we must inquire our way if we would find Master Florio's house ere darkness falls."

"Your Grace," said Roger, touching his cap, "I know it full well. John Florio's establishment is in North London, hard by the Lincoln Inn, and I can guide you thither."

"You are our savior," said the Earl. "Lead the way."

They passed through many crooked and narrow streets, at last entering upon Woburn Lane. They followed its winding way, passing to the rear of the famous Inn, and reining up their horses before a rambling old house of two stories, having a long court in the rear, the high stone wall of which was

thickly covered with ivy and flowering vines. Master Florio himself answered their summons, and cordially welcomed them to his abode. He was a tall, dignified gentleman, somewhat past the middle age. He was dressed in a simple but elegant suit of black, his only adornment being the handsome silver buckles of his satin knee-breeches. His iron-gray moustache and pointed beard of foreign cut, and the full rich tones of his melodious voice, slightly tinged with an Italian accent, denoted his nationality.

"Young gentlemen," said he, "you have come in the nick of time. Essex expected you ere this, Sir Henry. Our classes begin to-morrow, and with your arrival our complement is made. You had best spend your evening, after refreshment, in meeting your associates. Juliet," he called, and a handsome girl of eighteen, with oval cheeks and lustrous black hair and eyes ran to answer his summons. "My Lord Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, and Master William Shakespeare—my daughter Juliet," he said, pinching her fair cheek.

She curtseyed low, and the young earl stared at her open-mouthed, a fierce admiration for her beauty leaping to his eager eyes.

"Juliet, accompany these young sirs to the dining-hall, and give orders for their service; while I will provide accommodation for their servants in the scullery."

As they followed the demure maiden down the broad corridor, Henry grasped Shakespeare's arm, whispering:

"She is the breath of heaven, Will. Didst notice her lovely eyes? In their liquid depths there shines the soul of an angel, and when she dropped her fringing lashes as she curtseyed her greeting to us, my breath near left my body in my admiration."

"Take care, Henry, or you will lose your heart before you learn her language," Will laughingly whispered.

"Upon my soul, I believe I have done so already," answered the Earl. "The language of love needs no translation."

They entered the dining-hall, and to their surprise Juliet addressed them in English as pure as their own, indicating places for them at table, and leaving them with an apology as she hurried to give her orders for their repast.

She had scarcely departed when there was a hasty footstep at the door, and a tall and handsome youth rushed in and fell upon Wriothesley, wringing his hand and embracing him as he welcomed him to the fold. He was about the same age as the young Earl, though he looked fully as old as Will Shakespeare, who was in reality three years his senior. Albeit he was a good-humored lad, he lacked the bubbling spirits and boyish vivacity of Henry. He was of heavy build and more dignified mien, though to his friends he was pleasant and steadfast ever.

When the joy of their first meeting had somewhat subsided Henry remembered his companion.

"Robert," he said, "this is William Shakespeare, a member of our brotherhood, and my very good friend. Will, I have spoken to you of Robert Devreux, Earl of Essex."

They greeted each other cordially, and from that moment the friendship of the three youths was firmly cemented, though it was to be put to the test many times in the years to come.

After they had sated their hunger, Robert Devereux showed them about the house and grounds.

First, he took them to a broad room, where there were several benches, a crayon-board, and sundry globes and maps of various countries.

"This is where we recite our lessons," said he, and Henry quickly spoke up, saying:

"Then let us not tarry here until we have to, Robert. Show us some more interesting scene."

"I will take you to the fencing-room, young lazy-bones," said Devereux; "perhaps 'twill suit your fancy better."

They followed him to a spacious hall, with high ceiling, whose handsomely carved walls were hung with swords and ancient weapons, while figures of men in armor ranged round the room in stern array. At one end there stood a rack of foils with basket hilts and leaden points, and a score of wire masks hung in a corner. Two dummies, the size of men, were fastened to the floor, their bodies and heads penciled with many figures, red hearts painted on their left breasts, and cut and nicked with innumerable marks as a result of their daily contact with the pupils' rapiers.

"Ah! This is something like!" shouted Henry, seizing a foil, and leaping and thrusting at the dummies until Devereux laughingly grasped his arm and took the weapon away from him.

Next they went to a narrow alley at the rear wall of the garden, where they saw some targets and another dummy made of iron.

"Here you will indulge in pistol practice," said Essex. "'Tis the only place of its kind in London. You see Florio's school has its advantages."

After examining with curiosity the cumbersome weapons, and handling and sighting them to their heart's content, they went into the garden, and seated themselves on a bench midst fragrant roses and beautiful plants. The back of the house was covered with ivy, a small balcony furnishing egress from the first-story windows, where one might take the air, and whose railing was hidden from view by the tangled vines that hung in clustering masses from its whole length and trailed upon the scented earth beneath.

"A beautiful spot," sighed Henry, "in which to weave a romance or to woo a maid."

"Are you suffering from an attack of the vapours, Wriothesley?" asked Essex. "You will soon be cured once Master Florio sets you at your tasks."

They were interrupted by the entrance of a crowd of gay youths into the garden, and the new-comers were soon busy with introductions, and spent the time in conversation with their fellow-students until the darkness fell.

For the following year the youths remained under the tutelage of Master Florio. They studied the languages, in which Wriothesley was a poor scholar, Devereux a fair one, and Shakespeare an ardent searcher after the knowledge of the foreign tongues. In etiquette and dancing they were all apt pupils, for

each possessed an inborn grace that rendered them singularly alike. Shakespeare was the poorest swordsman of the three, though he did passably well, and owed his lack of perfection to the small time spent in the fencing-room. Devereux and Wriothesley vied with each other as to the supremacy of that branch of the school. As the very latest innovation in Paris was the equal use of either the right or the left hand in the duello, the French master instructed his pupils accordingly. Henry became an expert with his right hand, but could never overcome an awkwardness in using the other, though at that he was the master of all in the school save Robert. Devereux learned equally well with either hand, and his instructor often told him with great pride that he would in time become the equal of any swordsman in the land.

Will Shakespeare was Master Florio's favourite pupil. His mentality was far above the rest. With remarkable memory he had almost mastered the Italian tongue, and he had an imagination that surprised and delighted the romantic nature of his instructor, who encouraged the youth to give it full scope.

In his studies of ancient literature he wove many wonderful accounts about the mythical characters, and under his master's direction wrote a dialogue to be produced at Christmas-tide by the youths of the school. It abounded with such sparkling wit, and contained so much of originality and elegance in its conception that it proved the wonder of the pupils and the select audience that attended its rendition.

When John Florio witnessed this little play he

realized that the gentle youth had in his marvelous intellect the foundation of great fame, and he advised him to forego any further practise of the sword and pistol, and to spend his time in the building up of plays, interweaving the famous personages of history in his romances.

This latter occupation was carried on with the knowledge of none save the master and Shakespeare's two friends, whose admiration for him increased daily, and who predicted a brilliant future for him.

At the end of the year, Essex, who had been much longer at the school than Henry and William, finished his course and took his departure, as he was called to the Queen's court. He bade the lads a fond farewell, promising to do all in his power to further their future interests with the Queen, and with the hope of meeting them again in the royal train ere another term at the school had elapsed.

During the succeeding year, Wriothesley spent much of his time in the fencing-room, and more of it in ardent love passages with the coy Juliet, who realized the difference in their stations, and, though in truth her heart was touched by the youth's handsome face and impetuous wooing, she gave him but little encouragement, which, instead of dampening his ardor, seemed indeed to add fuel to the flame that burned in his breast.

Shakespeare had often been much amused by the antics of a portly fop who passed daily by the school, and who leered and smiled at two decent matrons as they stood at gossip every morning on their stoops. He had embodied the incident in a play

that he had been writing, and upon its completion he submitted it to Florio.

The master read it from beginning to end with many a chuckle and ejaculation of praise.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" he said, when he had finished. "Master Shakespeare, you are a born genius. We must arrange for a production before the Queen. If once her laughter is aroused by this inimitable comedy of your fat fool, your fortune will be assured and the patronage of my school increased a thousand-fold. I have the very method in my brain. My advices from Windsor inform me that Robert Devereux's favour with the Queen is second only to that of Leicester. We'll send the play to him, and his influence with Her Majesty will be a powerful lever to insure your entrance at court."

Accordingly the manuscript was despatched by post to Essex, with a letter from Master Florio stating his plan to bring William to the notice of Elizabeth.

In a few days a messenger arrived with a sealed missive for the tutor, which he broke open in the presence of Shakespeare and read the following:

Jno. Florio, Esqyre,
Deare Friend and Master:

Your letter came to me, and Will Shakespeare's most amusing play therewythe. I have laughed until my sides are sore at the antics of "Ye Merry Wives of Windsor" with that pussy shrew, Falstaff.

In accordance wythe your request I did gain audience wythe the Queen, and did recount to her some of its most ludicrous passages. Her interest was aroused at once, and she asked that she might read the play. I falsely told her that I had sent back the manuscript, but if she would cause a curtain and a scene to

be contrived in the palace, I would arrange for its production before her court, she recompensing the play-actors for their caperings, whilst I would undertake to present Will Shakespearre to her august self.

So if you will send Shakespeare and Southampton to fare wythe me at Windsor, and will come, your honored self, to direct the selection and the training of the mummers, I will engage that in a four week's lapse the comedy be shewn the Virgin Queen.

I awaite your appearance wythe eagerness.

I sign myself, kinde master,

Your humble servant,

Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex.

P. S.—Greet William and Henry, also your faire daughter in my behalf.

Florio's delight at the success of Essex knew no bounds, and he immediately set to work in preparation for their journey to the castle.

Shakespeare walked on air. He began to believe in the realization of the hopes of his youth, and though his joy was subdued, it was no less certain than his tutor's.

Southampton, alone, displayed a moody countenance, though his friend half guessed its cause, and felt no pangs at his apparent lack of interest in the play. Finally their plans were completed, and the morrow was set for their leave-taking.

Shakespeare had changed much in the two years since last we saw him on the road to the metropolis. He dressed in the latest London style, wore a small mustachio and a slight and pointed beard, and with his high and noble forehead, and clustering locks, falling almost to his shoulders, he was as handsome a youth as could be found in a day's journey through England. He had been walking in the twilight on this eve of their departure, and had seated

himself on the bench in his master's garden amongst the scented roses, wondering if this was to be his final adieu to the happiest moments of his life. The moon arose and lit the pretty garden with its gentle radiance ere he awoke from his musing and rose with the determination of seeking Wriothesley. He stopped short as he heard a voice humming lowly, and looking toward the house, beheld his friend underneath the balcony, and caught the words of the song :

“Oh, my lady fair
Come take the air,
'Neath the gentle moon's soft ray,
For to-morrow, dear,
I'll be far from here,
And I would hear thee say :
'I love thee, lad,
And my heart is sad
That you leave me here alone;
By my love for thee,
Come back to me
Ere many moons have flown.' ”

As the voice ceased, the window was pushed open, and Juliet Florio stepped wonderingly out upon the balcony. She was clad in a simple white gown, and her beautiful hair fell softly around her throat and shoulders. When she saw Wriothesley beneath she kneeled on the balcony, leaning her snowy arms on the low rail and resting her head upon them, as with drooping lashes, she spoke :

“My Lord, why do you sing 'neath my window?”

“Rather call me 'thy love,' Juliet. To-morrow I leave your father's home, perhaps forever; but before I go my bursting heart demands your answer to a question that my reason tells me is absurd.”

"Reason does not always sway us, my Lord," was the timid reply.

Southampton raised his head, the light of hope shining in his eyes.

"Juliet, dost love me, and wilt thou be my wife?" he said.

"My Lord, my humble station is a barrier between us that may never be surmounted," was the gentle answer. "Were I your equal, I would gladly cry my answer to the world."

"And that answer would be—?"

"I love thee, Henry," and she buried her face in her arms.

"My dear love," said he, his voice a-tremble with exultant joy, "by the silver moon, and the stars that attend her in her voyage in infinity, I swear that I will marry you and honour you as my noble wife before the whole world. What care I for the intrigues or mock honours of a court that is rotten to the core? We will live in the kingdom of our love, and if the mighty Elizabeth sees fit to interfere, she may have my title to bestow upon some pampered fool, but I will hold my wife, content to live and love with her, as tenant of the humblest hamlet in Southamptonshire."

He said no more, but seized the clinging ivy and lifted himself to the low balcony, and leaning upon the outer sill he raised his arms and drew her dear face close to his own, pouring forth all his love upon her clinging lips in one masterful and mighty kiss.

Then he dropped gently to the ground and strode silently away to the student's portion of the house, while Juliet remained enraptured on the balcony, the joy of perfect happiness shining on her lovely face.

CHAPTER V

THE COURT OF THE VIRGIN

In the great throne-room of the Queen's castle at Windsor, Robert Devereux, Henry Wriothesley and Will Shakespeare stood amidst a throng of simpering courtiers and overdressed dandies, eagerly awaiting the arrival of Her Majesty, who had set aside the day for the production of the comedy of "Ye Merry Wives."

With mingled feelings of joy at the near realization of his hopes, and of alarm at the uncertainty of the fickle monarch's reception of his play, Shakespeare stood on the verge of a brilliant future such as has never before or since his time been granted as the spoil of conquest to a single intellect, looking back upon the uneventful years of his past life, and breathing a fervent prayer that this first masterpiece of his youthful brain might find Elizabeth in a gracious mood.

The spacious hall where the Protestant ruler held her levees was a worthy meeting-place for the famous personages who well-nigh controlled the destinies of the whole world. In this council-chamber many of the crowned heads of Europe had been compelled to bend in deference to this wonderful woman's wishes.

The lofty ceiling was carved and decorated with innumerable pleasing figures; the walls, which were

some two hundred feet in length, and nearly half as wide, were thickly hung with medieval armor, ancient weapons and heraldic devices, and ranged on either side escutcheons alternated with paintings of many of the dead rulers of England, their cardinals, and famous men of their time.

The throne, on a broad dais at the end of the hall, was handsomely gilded and covered with a rare cloth, on which was embroidered a large "E" and the arms of Elizabeth.

Two minor stations stood at either side, which were intended for occupation by visiting monarchs. As was the custom of the time, only royal personages were permitted to sit in the Queen's presence in the throne-chamber, and maids of honour, and courtiers, young and old, were often compelled to stand for many weary hours at the reception of some visiting king.

Back of the throne were heavy draperies of arras, which concealed a deep recess, from which a secret entrance led to a covered stairway, and communicated with the rest of the castle. Elizabeth despatched frequent messengers to her confidants by means of this passage, and 'tis said that her favourites often concealed themselves behind the folds and watched the movements of the many changing courtiers that flitted round the person of the Queen.

The end of the hall opposite the throne was screened from observation by two curtains that were drawn on silken cords across the room and met in the center, concealing from view the raised platform which was but newly completed, and on which the players were to appear.

The crowd was all impatience for the entrance of the Queen, and their curious eyes eagerly sought the region of the stage as if to penetrate its hidden mysteries. As they murmured fretfully at the long delay a corner of the curtain was slowly raised, and a misshapen head appeared at the opening, while a grotesque visage grimaced at the anxious throng.

"'Tis Pulsifer Kyd, the fool," whispered Essex to his companions. "When Philip II announced his intended visit Elizabeth decided she must have a Cap and Bells, so to Sir Thomas Hatton, her Lord Chancellor, fell the duty of selecting him. He dressed this fellow in motley, and he does indeed somewhat dissipate the rigours of a royal session, though for the life of me, I cannot make out whether he is a crack-brained idiot or a clever rascal. Certain it is that out of his silly mouthings many a well-aimed satire or stroke of flashing wit does frequently fall to make their targets squirm."

"Elizabeth heeds him little, save to laugh," returned one, "and more than once have I seen his eyes light up with a gleam of intelligence that makes me fear he is not all he seems."

The head was withdrawn and in its stead a long limb appeared, immediately followed by the body of the jester, who backed out through the curtains and swiftly thrust them together again. He turned and capered up the floor, piping in shrill tones:

"Queen, Queen, where's the Queen?
I have seen what she's not seen;
I have peered behind the scene,
Which places me before the Queen."

He threw himself on his stomach on the step that led to the throne, and looked at his auditors, as he continued to gibber and squeak in indistinguishable tones.

He was a long and lanky varlet, and the attenuation of his limbs was accentuated by their green and yellow hose. His large head, which was entirely bald save for a scanty fringe of faded hair at the base of his skull, was surmounted by a pair of enormous and protruding ears, which, by some strange freak of nature, he was enabled to move back and forth at will. His little eyes were sunken deep under heavy brows, and his enormous nose was a red and shining beacon in the center of an otherwise colorless face.

He had scarcely thrown himself upon the step, when two pages appeared and drew aside the hangings at the entrance to the hall, while a herald announced:

"Her Gracious Majesty and Sovereign, Elizabeth I, Queen of England."

A hush fell upon the waiting courtiers as the royal procession entered.

First appeared a handsome gentleman, tall and of excessive dignity, who bore a gilded staff, and who, with most impressive stride, looking neither to right nor to left, directed his steps toward the royal dais.

"'Tis Sir Thomas Hatton, Lord Chancellor of the realm," said Devereux in lowered tone.

Next came four pages, bearing between them a large cushion, on which lightly rested a jeweled crown. Immediately after them walked the mightiest Queen the world has ever known.

As Elizabeth proceeded slowly up the center of the room, nodding and smiling graciously to the nobles on either side, Will Shakespeare with eager eyes took in every detail of her magnificent person.

Of more than average height, she trod the floor with infinite grace. Her oval face, with its high forehead and tapering chin, he could see, all too plainly, was heavily enameled and painted to conceal the wrinkling ravages of time. Her dark red hair was dressed in a thick roll away from her brow, and was worn high on her head and studded with many jewels. Her mouth was small, and the lips were heavily rouged. Her nose was aquiline, and almost hooked, while her beady black eyes danced restlessly in her head, and seemed to pierce through and through the person upon whom she gazed. In her small ears she wore two heavy pearl pendants, and her especial pride, her tiny hands, with their tapering fingers, were frequently raised to toy with necklace or jewel, that the beholder might be impressed with their beauty.

She wore an enormous ruff of exquisite lace that entirely concealed her neck from view. A sleeveless bodice of black velvet, thickly studded with diamonds, covered the bosom of her white gown, with its profusion of richly embroidered flowers, and her train, which trailed for several yards beneath her great cloak of sable and ermine, was borne at its center by a marchioness of the realm, and on either side by three of her ladies-in-waiting. Around her neck, and under her ruff, there hung a many-stranded rope of priceless pearls.

Her fading beauty was most sadly marred by her blackened teeth, which displayed themselves in all their ugliness when her lips parted in a smile. Strange to say, this defect never once concerned her, though on all other points of beauty she was extremely sensitive, to the minutest detail.

At the rear of the Queen's train-bearers there walked in solitary state a strange figure of a man. Tall and spare, with massive head hung low upon his breast, his large body clothed in black, with cloak and doublet of the same; his thin legs, with their enormous bulging knee-joints, dressed in lemon-colored fleshings; his sole decoration being an enormous diamond star that was fastened upon his bosom. His hair was black. His parchment-colored face and round and blinking eyes, with his large nose, thick under-lip, and scraggly chin beard gave to him an appearance not unlike the recognized image of His Satanic Majesty, as he stalked toward the throne.

He was the Queen's royal brother-in-law, Philip II of Spain.

Behind him strutted a fat and pompous being in ecclesiastical garb, and to Shakespeare's whispered query Essex made answer:

"'Tis the Lord Bishop Kitchen of Llandaff, Will; the conformist minister. He is in high favour with Elizabeth and would conform to anything to keep his stomach filled. He has an eye for the women, and does now most assiduously advocate the marriage of the clergy; but, though the Queen listens to him in other matters, she will have none of this,

and flies into a rage whenever he broaches the subject."

Next came Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, with two Spanish nobles, the Duke of Alva, and Philip's minister, Don Ruy Gomez de Silva, and close upon their heels walked a group of famous men, Sir Walter Raleigh, beloved by his company of the guards, talking earnestly with Sir Amias Paulet, Keeper of the Tower; and arm in arm at their left two of the greatest navigators that ever sought the seas, the handsome Sir Francis Drake, just returned from the Queen's colony of Virginia, and the Spanish admiral, Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma. A long train of pages, attendants, messengers and ladies-in-waiting closed the pageant.

The Queen ascended the dais and seated herself upon the throne, while Sir Thomas Hatton lifted the crown which the kneeling pages held, and set it lightly upon her head. Philip II bowed low and took his seat at her right hand, looking gloomily at the vast assemblage. Leicester stepped behind the Queen, and stood gracefully near the left of the throne, while the Spanish grandees took their stations by their king. The other members of the royal suite ranged themselves according to their rank on either side of the dais, and awaited Her Majesty's command.

Elizabeth turned her glance upon the jester, who lay on the step, his chin resting on his hands, grimacing and wiggling his huge ears. A slight smile played upon the Queen's lips and she tapped him lightly with her foot, saying:

"Master Kyd, we shall dispense with your drol-lies to-day. I hope to find better amusement on yon curtained stage. My Lord Hatton, we are over-delayed; the presentations may await the play. Despatch a messenger at once to the actors and signify our readiness."

Sir Thomas whispered to a page, who bowed and disappeared behind the arras, and in a moment a tinkling bell was heard, and the heavy curtains were drawn aside by invisible hands, disclosing the first scene of the famous comedy.

From the opening speech of the ignorant country justice until the close of the act the Queen and all her courtiers listened with rapt attention, broken only by peals of merry laughter, to the witty lines that fell from the lips of the clever players. When the curtain was dropped for a brief interval a noisy buzz spread through the audience, as they discussed the plot and expressed their delight at the sparkling comedy.

The Queen was the picture of animation; her bright eyes flashed, her face was wreathed in smiles; she bobbed her head to the nobles on either side, and made many laughing comments on the show. She leaned toward the King of Spain, speaking merrily to him, and tapping him playfully on the knee with her fan, and even his saturnine face lit up in a smile of response as he caught the infection of Her Majesty's enjoyment.

As the play proceeded, and the theme became more intricate, he was forced to unbend, and joined heartily in the general laughter that rippled forth at the comical predicaments of the love-sick swains.

Elizabeth, with open mouth and gleaming eyes, listened with absorbing interest to the clumsy attempts of the fat Falstaff at intrigue with the faithful matrons. When he fell into their trap, and was hidden in the clothes-basket neath the smothering heap of soiled linen, and carried away to be dumped in the muddy waters of the Thames, her feelings overcame her, and casting all dignity aside, she lay back in her throne fairly screaming with laughter, while the tears streamed down her painted cheeks. So boisterous was her glee that the action of the play was stopped until the monarch had somewhat regained her control.

The mistakes of Dr. Caius and Slender in carrying off and marrying the masked boys tickled her immensely, and when the final curtain fell on the happy termination of Fenton's wooing of Mistress Anne Page, she led in the storm of hand-clapping and applause that was continued until the entire company appeared and bowed their acknowledgment of the praise.

When they had at last retired she sat for some time, frequently bursting into laughter at memory of the droll caperings of the elephantine Falstaff, and recounting to her suite the scenes that most struck her fancy.

Shakespeare stood with his two friends, who joyously wrung his hand, and assured him that his fortune was made. His breast swelled with pride, but his heart was full, and he made no answer to their happy protestations.

During the play his eyes had sought constantly the beautiful face of Mistress Anne Hathaway, the

Queen's maid of honour. As the various emotions excited by the comedy played upon her handsome features his hands clenched, his breath came in short gasps, and he knew in his own soul, as he had never realized before, that his play had been written for this one being alone of all on earth. When she rapturously joined in the applause his soul was satisfied and he cared not whether Queen or King or man or maid delighted in his production so long as she was pleased.

She had never once glanced in his direction, and he felt that her memory recalled him not; that she would view him simply as a clever contriver of humorous situations, and that his cherished vision of the episode of his sentence by the Queen was but a blank in her mind.

Presently the Queen raised her voice.

"Sir Thomas Hatton," said she "bring me this Master Shakespeare that I may publicly thank him for the pleasure he has given his grateful sovereign."

The tactful Essex quickly grasped Shakespeare's arm, and stepping forth from the throng of courtiers, he guided the modest youth to the front of the throne, and dropping to his knee before the Queen, he said:

"Your Majesty, this is my friend whose praises I so strongly sounded in your ears. His triumph to-day justifies your noble kindness in listening to his play."

He drew back and left the abashed young man kneeling before Elizabeth, a rosy blush suffusing his face and his eyelashes lowered in confusion.

The Queen laughed merrily at his embarrassment and said:

‘Arise, Master Shakespeare; ’tis my court that should kneel at your feet in acknowledgment of the wonderful intellect that prepared our entertainment to-day.’

“Your Majesty,” answered Will, “to my tutor, Master John Florio, much of the credit is due. ’Twas under his advice that I composed the play.”

“You are too modest,” laughed Elizabeth. “We hope to witness more of your productions.”

As she ceased, Leicester, who had been watching the youth for some moments with an expression of perplexity upon his face, suddenly gave a start of recognition, and leaning over the throne whispered in the monarch’s ear:

“Cast your eye upon the young man’s sleeve, your Majesty.”

The Queen glanced carelessly in the direction he indicated, and as she noticed a tiny emblem upon Will’s cuff her eye lit up with a delighted gleam. She leaned hastily forward and in a low voice said:

“I see, friend Shakespeare, that you are one of those who has my life in his keeping. ’Tis a double service you have rendered me.”

“Your Highness,” he answered, “you spared my life once, when it was forfeit to the crown.”

“I don’t understand you. I never set eyes upon you till to-day.”

“Does your Majesty remember a morning some two years since when a young country lad and his faithful serving-man were haled before you for the

slaying of a deer? You did pronounce the death sentence but 'twas afterwards rescinded."

The Queen stared at him for a moment, then as the recollection of the incident dawned upon her she laughed heartily and turned to where her ladies stood in a group of loveliness.

"Anne Hathaway," she called, "your birthday gift has come to court. Faith, I think I will give you a necklace after all, for you have indeed done me a good turn. You saved Master Shakespeare's life and he has returned the debt with interest, for I am sure he has prolonged mine. I have not laughed so much in a six months' space. E'en my Lord Bishop Kitchen's scowl at the iniquity of a play in the royal palace changed perforce into a grin at the antics of that merry wight Falstaff."

The Lady Anne Hathaway turned for a moment at Her Majesty's command. Her face grew crimson as the attention of the whole court was attracted to her by the action of the Queen. She steadily surveyed the young author for a moment, then elevating her chin, she turned away with a look of disdain, resuming her conversation with the other ladies, while poor Will's heart sank within him.

The Queen laughed heartily at the maid's gesture of scorn, and said, "Ah, the hearts of the fair are fickle indeed"; and she shot a stinging dart at another of the company as she continued: "Sir Thomas Hatton's joy at Anne's tilting chin is ill concealed, but I will at least prove steadfast, for as you shall see, Elizabeth is still your friend. Sir Thomas, you will draw an order upon the royal cof-ferer in favour of Master William Shakespeare for

one hundred pounds. You will issue another of like amount to Master John Florio, to be expended at his school in the furtherance of literary pursuits during the forthcoming year. You will also make provision for the attachment of William Shakespeare to our court, and you will ask Sir Walter Raleigh to detail one of his guardsmen to attend upon him.

"Nay, nay, Master Shakespeare," she said, as he began to stammer his gratitude for her kindness, "there are too many dawdling idlers in our suite; 'twill refresh us greatly to have a man of active brain to set a pattern to these sluggards. Sir Thomas, let us proceed with the presentations."

When the levee had ended and the Queen and her ladies-in-waiting and nearly all of the royal train had taken their departure from the throne-room, the crowd of nobles and courtiers that thronged the hall pressed forward to obtain a closer view of the genius who had so suddenly sprung to the heights of Her Majesty's favour. Ere they could surround him and his joyous friends, the Earls of Essex and Southampton, the tall figure of Leicester, who had lingered for a moment at the throne, pushed apart the curious dandies and made his way to Shakespeare's side. He grasped him cordially by the hand, saying :

"My young hero of the highway, I am highly gratified at your success and your sudden accession at court. Rest assured you may always count me your friend."

"Your Grace," said Will, "I have received much of kindness at your hands, but there is still another

favour I would ask, if you will not consider me too importunate."

"And that is—" smiled the Earl.

"Your intercession with Sir Walter Raleigh that a certain Roger Covert, of his guards, be detailed as my attendant."

CHAPTER VI

MY LADY'S GARTER

One bright and balmy morning, a fortnight after Shakespeare's advent at court, Philip II, King of Spain, was taking the air on a secluded terrace which formed one of the many private gardens that dotted the confines of the palace walls. This particular enclosure not only opened out from his own apartments, but also communicated with the portion of the castle occupied by the Queen's personal suite.

The King paced solemnly up and down the walk, his hands clasped behind him, his lips twitching nervously, and giving little heed to the bright flowers or green grass that robed the terrace in a brilliant mantle of variegated colors.

He occasionally stamped his foot and muttered to himself. At last he stopped and spoke aloud:

"Was ever a monarch between two such fires? The Queen or Mary? Mary or the Queen? By my faith, if the Virgin will not have me I'll take the other by force or stratagem. Mary Stuart was ever an advocate of my faith, and with our combined forces allied against this Protestant vixen we may yet conquer the world. Hello! What have we here?" he continued, as two ladies-in-waiting stepped forth from an embrasure of the Queen's apartment and strolled to a bench at the lower part of the terrace, where they seated themselves.

The King stood in silent contemplation of them for a moment, then he cleared his throat loudly, and, as they looked up quickly at the noise, he raised his arm and crooked his finger for them to approach. The ladies arose and walked demurely to where he stood, his legs spread apart, a faint smile upon his sallow face. They dropped in curtsey before the monarch and awaited his command.

"As I thought," said he, "it is the Lady Anne Hathaway. I would have a word with you in private, if your companion will consent to the interruption."

At this implied order, the second lady bowed low and turned away, walking swiftly to the castle and entering the open window.

The King gazed in silence at the maiden for a moment as she stood before him with downcast eyes. Finally he spoke:

"My maid, you wear a pretty face."

"You honour me, sire," she answered; "but if this is all you have to say to me, I had best return to the Queen."

"Nay, nay!" protested the amused monarch; "we have something to discuss which bears most strongly on your future welfare. Did ever thought of marriage enter your handsome head?"

"Your Majesty, every woman has hopes of a happy wedded state before the ashes of age have withered the roses of youth on her cheeks."

"You may attain a noble rank in one of the greatest courts of Europe, if you will be guided by my counsel."

"Why, your Highness, what do you mean? You speak strangely."

"Just this, Mistress Anne; Don Ruy Gomez de Silva, my prime minister, is entranced by your youthful beauty and your proud and noble bearing, and he has importuned me to use my influence with the Queen that he may carry you back to Spain as his bride."

The girl went pale at the King's revelation, and for a time her agitation kept her dumb. At last she opened her lips.

"But I do not love him, sire," she said.

"Pah! Love, love, love! That is all one hears nowadays in this frivolous court of a romantic ruler. From Elizabeth down to the lowest maid in the scullery you have all become so imbued with this fancy that you have a heart, that considerations of rank and fame enter no longer into our undertakings. You can learn to love this nobleman midst the delights and luxuries of his sumptuous villa in Spain."

"Why, your Majesty, he is twice my age."

"'Tis his misfortune that he may not add the lost years to a life of happiness with thee."

"And he is but recently widowed."

"Is it a crime that a man desires to take unto himself another wife? If the roses in our gardens die do we not replace them with fresh and more beautiful ones? De Silva is a high grandee in the greatest Catholic realm on the face of the globe. Your future happiness, as well as your hopes of salvation, will be both assured if you do but embrace his offer and our faith."

"Your Majesty, I am true to the teachings of my Queen. She has ruled this country with a master-hand since long before my birth, and she has ever been steadfast in her faith. Would you have me, a lowly subject of this generous monarch, and one attached to her royal person by the sacred ties of love and duty, so desecrate my honour as to desert my mistress's faith?"

"Tut, tut, child, we will waive the religion. No doubt you will be of more liberal mind when once you hold the scepter of power in Don Gomez's home."

"Your Majesty," said the brave maiden, "'tis a vision that will never be fulfilled. I do not love De Silva, and I will not wed him. I wonder if the day will ever come when monarchs will understand that a maiden's nay is mightier than a king's command."

The King recoiled a pace, and his brow grew black at the damsel's boldness. He looked at her with threatening frown, and his harsh voice that at last broke the stillness purported naught of good for Mistress Anne.

"Then, my impudent hussy," he said, "we will see what effect the Queen's order will have upon you. I will seek audience with my royal sister-in-law and make my request in person. I hardly think she will deny the wishes of so powerful a monarch. Don Gomez has served me faithfully for many years, and I fain would provide him with the bauble he does now demand."

Anne Hathaway straightened her shoulders, and her wonderful eyes flashed in open defiance of the royal plotter.

"King Philip," said she, "ere you mingle in the affairs of others you had best look to your own case. Ah, do you think we English maidens are so blind that we do not understand this call of yours upon our Queen? You seek her hand in royal marriage. You would mightily strengthen your throne and spread your faith throughout the entire world by this alliance. But methinks you will find that Elizabeth has a mind of her own ere you have ended your courtship."

"Take care, maid!" snapped the King; "you will rue your boldness."

"I am willing to rest my case, and your own, too, King Philip, with the Queen. If I have been rude and have forgotten the difference in our stations, or have failed to accord you the respect which is your due, I plead my outraged feelings as my excuse. Let your prime minister find some maiden of more yielding disposition. There are plenty such at court who would gladly grasp at the chance of marrying your antiquated grandee. With your permission, I will seek the castle." She curtseyed low, then faced about and ran swiftly from his detested presence.

Instead of entering the window she sped across the terrace and round the corner of the wall that bordered upon a larger court, while the King stood in baffled rage, gnawing his nails and cursing furiously under his breath.

As she hurried through the second court and turned to enter a little door in the wall that held communication with a hall leading to the Queen's apartment, the slouching figure of a man entered the enclosure on his way to King Philip with a mes-

sage from his prime minister. He was an evil-looking Spaniard, by name Fernando Cordes, and accompanied Gomez in the capacity of a valet.

As the maiden, with a swish of her skirts and a twinkle of flying feet, disappeared within the doorway his eyes caught the glitter of a bright object falling to the ground. He hurried forward to see what it might be just as another man, of military figure, came into the court behind him. He saw a handsome jeweled buckle which had become unfastened from Anne's garter, and which had fallen unnoticed in her haste to escape the King. He pounced upon it with a greedy cry, and as he stooped on the stone floor of the court a strong hand seized him by the nape of the neck and shook him until the teeth rattled in his head.

"You sneaking Dago," said the voice of Roger Covert, "hand me that pretty bauble, and leave the dirty work of the court to the foreign monkeys whom you serve. They'll steal our fair dames fast enough without their villains cabbaging their jewels. Gad, but you are an ugly fellow," he said, as the Spaniard writhed in his grasp and turned his yellow face toward him. He twisted the buckle from his hand, saying: "I will find an owner for this. 'Tis a lucky thing I happened along just as I did, or the Jew money-lenders might soon have had these diamonds scattered to the four corners of the city. Know you the damsels whom I glimpsed flying through yon door?"

"'Twas the Queen's lady, Anne Hathaway," answered the Spaniard in his imperfect English. "It was but to hasten after her that I pick up the jewel,

when you interrupt my plan by the clasp of your hand upon my neck."

"Bah, a likely story," said Roger, as he released his hold upon the lying rogue, and applying the toe of his jack-boot to the region of his doublet, he sent him sprawling on the floor of the court.

Without looking back, he proceeded on his way, and entering the castle, hurried to the apartment set aside for his master, Will Shakespeare. When Covert had disappeared from view, Fernando rose painfully, rubbing his injured body and vowing vengeance with many picturesque oaths.

As Covert burst into the room, Will Shakespeare, who sat writing at a small table, looked up.

"Well, Roger," he said, "you storm my citadel with all the vigor of an invading army. What brings you here in such haste?"

Roger threw the clasp upon the table, saying:

"Master Will, you should be pleased at my return, for I bring you a token from your lady."

"You jest, Covert. There is not one fair damsel in this great court whose heart beats faster at my approach."

"I'll wager you the owner of this garter would gladly welcome you as a suitor, though she did in truth treat you most scurvily on your first appearance at court. But I know a thing or two, Master Will. Anne Holcombe, the laundress, tells me that my Lord Thomas Hatton was on the verge of a successful consummation of his suit for the Lady Anne Hathaway's hand, but that in the last two weeks the fickle maid has blown cold upon his advances, much to the amusement of the Queen and

to the discomfiture of Sir Thomas, who vows that he will win her by fair means or foul."

"What is this to me, Roger?" said Shakespeare, his heart giving a great leap of hope at the slow progress of the chancellor's wooing. "I have not held speech with her since I came to court, though she has brushed past me at various times with no more sign of recognition than if I were the empty air."

"Ah, master, master. I fear me you do not understand the workings of a woman's heart. They are coy creatures, but more exacting when they find they hold one in their thrall, than my stern captain, Sir Walter Raleigh of the guards. But if you do but turn upon them an indifferent front they do quickly tumble off their pedestals and grovel pitifully at your knees. You may scourge them, you may scorn them, but they love you all the better for it. They love to be loved, but being loved and knowing it, you lose their love unless you do steer a middle course, and though loving them inwardly much love them outwardly little; then they cling to you like the castle's ivy, growing old with you and finding happiness in the daily wounds of your indifference."

"Why, Roger, you are a philosopher. I never credited you as so close a student of the gentle sex."

"I have my laundress, master, and if ever a wench led a man a merry race, I am a great runner. But I flatter myself I understand her pretty well."

"You are much of a pessimist, too, Roger. What if the Queen could listen to your discourse? But

this has nothing to do with the garter. Here I am all on fire to learn its history. How came it in your possession?"

"I was but now skirting the terraces, and taking a short cut to your presence, when I saw Mistress Hathaway scurrying across the court as though the Devil were after her, and in truth one of his imps was close at her heels, though she knew it not. As she entered the castle she lost her buckle, and that yellow lackey of Don Gomez's, who was skulking along the wall, pounced upon it and was on the verge of making his rusty pouch a receiver of stolen goods. I relieved him of his booty, however, and elected myself his treasurer. Oh, but he would much enjoy twisting a knife between my shoulders! I must keep him at sword's length hereafter."

"Why do you bring the clasp to me, Roger? You would have done well to have returned it to its rightful owner."

"Master Will, if you will hearken to the advice of your humble squire, you will hold it in your keeping until the maiden comes to you herself as a suppliant for its return. It may be contrived that she might learn its resting-place ere many days have passed."

"Roger, you do tempt me mightily," said Shakespeare, as he toyed with the jewel.

The same afternoon a tiny note was thrust into Anne Hathaway's hand as she entered the throne-room in the suite of the Queen, and the cringing figure of Fernando Cordes disappeared in the crowd of courtiers as she crumpled it in her palm.

When the levee was over she went to her own apartment, broke the seal, and read the missive, which consisted of two lines written in tiny letters in an exquisite Roman hand: "Your garter was stolen by one Roger Covert, a disgraced member of the Queen's Guard."

She tore the note into bits and threw the fragments out of an open window, then thought deeply for several minutes, evidently trying to decide upon some plan for the recovery of her jewel. Her eyes flashed indignantly at thought of the theft; she had supposed that it would soon be returned to her, as the finder would well understand that none but a person in high favour with the Queen could wear such a costly ornament. At last she made up her mind and arose with the intention of seeking Walter Raleigh and denouncing the culprit.

As she hurried along the hall she ran suddenly almost into the arms of Sir Amias Paulet, who had just left the throne-room.

"Whither away, Mistress Anne, in such haste?" asked the courtly gentleman, as he stepped aside to allow her to pass.

"Oh! Sir Amias," she said, "I know you can help me. I lost a diamond buckle, and I have just learned that it was stolen by Roger Covert, a guardsman of Sir Walter Raleigh's company. Will you use your influence with his captain that the rogue may be flogged, and my garter returned?"

"Roger Covert, did you say? He was, some two years back, stripped of his uniform, and left his company in disgrace. But he was restored at the command of the Earl of Leicester, whom none dare

refuse. This last offense will prove his undoing, for even Robert Dudley cannot dispute the evidence of his guilt."

"Then you will assist me, Sir Amias?"

"With all my heart. I will go to Raleigh at once, and have the rascal turned out for good and all."

"Be sure you bring back my buckle, Sir Amias."

"That I will, my Lady, and I must also find a new attendant for William Shakespeare; this man was detailed at his own request."

"Master Shakespeare, did you say, Sir Amias?" faltered the maiden.

"Yes. He has served him since his advent at court. But I must hasten ere Sir Walter leaves the palace."

"Hold, Sir Amias. There may have been some slight mistake on the part of my informant. I would not condemn the fellow unjustly. Could you not contrive to have him sent to me, and keep the secret until you hear further about this from my lips?"

"Certainly, my Lady, but it were wiser to have him seized."

"You will oblige me greatly, Sir Amias."

"I am at your command, Lady Anne."

She returned to her rooms, and in a short time she heard the sound of footsteps in the hall, and there was a sharp tap at her door. In response to her command Roger Covert entered and stood with bared head just inside the threshold.

"Your ladyship sent for me?" he said.

"You are Roger Covert?" she questioned.

He bowed in assent and she looked at him seriously for a moment ere she continued:

"This morning I lost a jeweled garter, a most valuable keepsake, and one that I prize the more highly because it was given to me by the Queen. I was willing to reward the lucky finder handsomely for the return of my clasp, and I did not think there was one in the castle low enough to steal."

"What do you infer, madame?"

"Covert, you have my garter. I will give much for its return. Let me have it and I will empty my purse for your kindness. I would never hear the last of it, if Her Majesty discovered that it had passed out of my keeping. Come, come, man, hand it over, and none need be the wiser."

"My Lady, your jewel is not in my possession, though some enemy of mine has evidently most foully accused me of its theft. I could tell you, though I will not, the name of the guilty varlet. I caught him in the act of appropriating it this very morning, and took it away from him.

"As I am but a poor soldier of the guard, withal an honest one, I had no use for such a handsome bauble, and turned it over to my master, William Shakespeare, thinking that he could best advise as to its disposition. Methinks I heard him say that he would keep the little clasp until the owner came to ask it of him.

"If any one is the thief, my Lady, it is Master Shakespeare, for I gave it up willingly, while he does most admiringly survey its beauties, turning it over and over in his hand, and seeming loath to part with it for a single instant. I have no doubt, though, that if you will call upon him and assure him of your

ownership, he will gladly return to you your treasure."

Anne Hathaway's face was suffused with a deep blush as she answered Covert in attempted nonchalance:

"O, we will not bother our heads further about the trinket. We have already wasted much time in discussing it. You may go, Roger Covert. I am sorry to have caused you the inconvenience of a visit to my apartment. I assure you the loss is a mere trifle."

Covert bowed and turned to leave the room. Anne looked up as he paused at the threshold.

"What will the Queen say, my Lady?" he queried, and closed the door after him.

CHAPTER VII

THE TILT AT RHYME

The Queen leaned back in her low wicker chair, giving herself up to the enjoyment of the beautiful afternoon and listening idly to the conversation of her ladies-in-waiting.

"It is good indeed, my Lord Bishop, to find solace and seclusion from the pomp of the court in the beauties of my garden," she said, languidly turning her head toward her spiritual adviser, who stood, resting his elbow on one hand and his chin on the other, and who had been regarding her meditatively until she addressed him.

"'Tis here that I am free, Kitchen. I can stretch my legs, I can yawn, I can sigh without the eyes of the whole world being upon me. In there I am a slave to my subjects. I must ever appear the royal monarch. If I were to unbend for a moment in their presence, or to display a touch of human nature, I would lose my hold upon them.

"Ah, therein lies the secret of my successful reign. I keep them in their places; they look upon me with awe as some superior being, a divinity gifted with unearthly power; and they dearly love to be belittled and befooled.

"Without the blessed relaxation of my daily hour in the garden I fear me my spirit would bend under

the strain; but my ladies sing for me here, Kyd beguiles me with his nonsense, and you cheer me at times with your words of comfort and your views of the future state."

"Your Majesty," answered the churchman, "in our hours of ease we must not neglect our spiritual welfare. The cares of state do greatly turn your royal mind to worldly affairs, and your soul's salvation demands an interval of religious communion."

"I am weary, my Lord Bishop, weary of the mockery of my cringing courtiers, of the suit of foreign monarchs for my hand, of the daily intrigues and clever attempts to gain the royal favour. Let us soothe our senses in a song. Anne, come hither with your lute. We will see if your sweet voice can rouse the spirit of your Queen."

At her Majesty's command Anne approached her mistress, and her companions followed, disposing themselves in graceful attitudes upon the grass at their sovereign's feet. The Bishop still stood, and Pulsifer Kyd, the jester, who had been curled up in the sun behind Elizabeth's chair, unwound his lanky limbs and fetched a footstool, which he handed to the maid of honour.

"Listen, Kitchen," whispered the Queen; "the girl does sometimes improvise most beautiful tunes."

Anne Hathaway bent over her lute for a moment, gently stroking the strings and humming in a low tone; then she raised her head and her clear voice fell musically upon the listeners' ears, the tinkling notes of the lute furnishing sweet accompaniment. At the opening line of her song the Queen opened wide her eyes in astonishment, and ere her daring hand-

maiden had ceased, her drooping spirit had regained its fire.

Thus ran the burden of the tune:

"A gallant ship came sailing
Across the Spanish Main,
It bore a prince of royal blood
And his attendant train.
At the court of our fair Lady
The monarch now repines,
His kingly heart to thoughts of love
Most tenderly inclines.

"Your Highness, we implore thee
To say this suppliant 'Nay';
Your subjects all adore thee,
And love the gentle sway
Of Queenly hand that guides the helm
Of your proud ship of state;—
Dismiss the King; our Virgin Queen
Deserves a better fate.

"His minister takes pattern
Of Philip's crafty plan,
And woos your maid, who loves him not,
For she prefers a man
With England's blood in his blue veins
And courage in his breast;
She prays that you will lend her aid,
For she is sore distressed.

"Let your proud faith withstand him;—
This papal advocate
Would rule your Church, and scourge the land
With ruthless strife and hate.
The single state is better far
Than union with proud Spain;
Send ship and crew, and monarch too,
Back to the Spanish Main."

Elizabeth's face was a study when the girl finished her song. The churchman looked gravely on, and

her hand-maidens sat in awe-struck silence, narrowly watching for the example of their mistress before they passed opinion on the tune. For a moment the Queen seemed on the point of bursting forth in a storm of rage, and even Anne dropped her eyes and waited with beating heart the censure of her sovereign.

But the monarch's good nature asserted itself and she gave vent to her feelings in a peal of laughter, which was echoed by her ladies.

"How now, Kitchen? Did I not tell thee that the lass had a ready wit? In sooth she brings me to my senses. Here I have been dallying for a month with my royal brother-in-law, knowing full well the purport of his visit, but playing with him as a cat with a mouse, in my serenity believing that my court was blind. Now out of the mouth of my hand-maiden I am punished for my folly. Anne, my girl, you might not have been so keen to call your mistress to account were it not for the suit of King Philip's minister. He would be a great match for you."

"No, no, your Highness, I cannot bear the thought of this oily foreigner. If wedded I must be, let me take a man of my own speech and manner."

The Queen chuckled.

"Kitchen, if Sir Thomas Hatton could hear my Lady's avowal he would in sooth be pleased. 'Tis a noble plea for the English stock, Anne. What say you, my Lord Bishop?"

"I would say that the Earl of Leicester would also applaud her verse," blandly answered the minister.

Elizabeth's eyes flashed ominously at the implication, but she pretended not to heed it.

"Well, well, Anne," she said, "you have indeed diverted us. Methinks that there will be no marriage in my court for some time to come. Let Philip seek the Netherlands. The Dutch princess might desire to take an ocean trip. I doubt not he could bend her to his will."

"I am fain to believe he has an eye upon the Queen of Scots," slyly remarked the Bishop, "in case he fails to win your hand."

"Mary Stuart is confined in the Tower, where she is like to remain," snapped Elizabeth. "The Duke of Norfolk is most ardently striving to compass her release. The fickle shrew already plans to make him the fourth on her list of husbands. But we may spare him Darnley's fate by keeping her penned up until his love-flame cools. Think you that marriage is advisable at this late day?"

"Your Highness," Kitchen humbly responded, "I have often broached my ideas on the subject, but you will never hear me out. I believe it to be the one perfect state and the condition decreed by God to complete our obligations on this earth."

"Then you would class me as a sinner because I choose to rule my kingdom, independent of the sterner sex. Do you desire to marry at your age, my Lord?"

"You know that I have ever advocated the marriage of the clergy."

"And you would erase the distinction that has always been a power in itself, the celibacy of the princes of the church. Why, with your example, my subjects would quickly lose all respect of religious tenets. You would mingle so closely with them,

and liken yourselves so much to their persons and pursuits, that they would fall away from their belief, and seeing and hearing you daily in their midst, would refuse to listen to your vapid utterings on the Lord's selected day."

"Matrimony is religion, your Highness, the purest creed of them all. What greater incentive could there be for a churchman to strive to spread his doctrines through the world than the companionship of a faithful wife, abiding at his elbow and urging him on, happy in his success, hopeful when he is downcast, sharing his daily toil and life of deprivation, with little of joy in her life, her only happiness lying in the knowledge that she is doing right in the eyes of the world and of her God?"

The Queen was staggered for an instant, then with a gesture of impatience she silenced her minister.

"Pah, Kitchen," said she, "you do indeed prate well, if you were but sincere; but 'tis a notorious fact that you do keep an establishment in London, another outside of Windsor, and the Lord knows how many damsels are languishing in Llandaff for want of your company. You cannot marry them all so I refuse to let you marry at all. You had best drop the subject, my Lord Bishop, for I am sure we can never hitch on't."

The Bishop raised his hands deprecatingly at the charge, and the Queen laughed merrily at his discomfiture before her ladies.

The jester rolled on the ground in a paroxysm of glee, grimacing drolly at Elizabeth, while he wriggled his ears and emitted sharp cackles of joy which added greatly to her mirth.

Two gentlemen in court dress crossed a distant corner of the terrace as Kitchen's tormentors were having their fling at him. Hearing the noisy laughter they paused for an instant and faced about. Their action caught the sharp eye of Elizabeth, and she leaned over and spoke hastily to the jester:

"Kyd," she said, "if my eyes deceive me not, the Earl of Southampton and Master Shakespeare do walk in the garden. Run quickly and summon them. Say that the Queen would have speech with them."

The fool cut a caper and bounded off, while her Highness leaned back in her chair. "A notion strikes me," said she. "If my plan does not fail we may derive some further entertainment from our afternoon in the garden."

The jester soon returned with the strollers, who doffed their caps and bent their knees before the Queen. Elizabeth bade them arise, and looked at Shakespeare quizzically.

"We are at your Majesty's service," said he.

"'Tis seldom that our afternoon's season of maid-only discourse is honored by a visit of the sterner sex," said the Queen. "Of course we have Kitchen here, but he counts for naught. So wrapped up is he in religious thoughts that he is but a dull bird, in somber plumage, who sings not, and who does display a most sour and wrinkled visage whenever we indulge in laughter or in jesting speech.

"Master Shakespeare, you have obtained a strong foothold at my court through the imaginings of your fertile brain. I have read much of your beautiful poetry, and have had it read to me, and I have taken great delight therein. But you have a rival at court

who is an adept at the art of making verse. You needs must look to your laurels."

"'Tis not impossible, your Highness, to over-match my weak attempts. I would hear his verse, that I might profit by his muse and dress my lines in more pleasing garb."

"Your Majesty," bluntly interposed Wriothesley, "I challenge you to produce this man. I do most rigourously deny the existence of one as clever as Will Shakespeare in the art of making rhyme."

"Softly, softly, Southampton. You do bridle like a peacock at danger to his mate. Your poet can no doubt take care of himself. In the first place 'tis no man, but a maid, I'd match against your gifted friend."

Southampton fell back abashed and Shakespeare looked in wonderment at the Queen.

"Master Shakespeare," she continued, "no doubt her efforts could not compare with your carefully prepared and polished verse. But she has a quick wit, and can extemporize most wonderfully. One has but to name a subject and she plunges heatedly into her rhyme, greatly pleasing our ears with her harmonious jingles. I summoned you to me that we might have a friendly contest of your wits, if you will but agree. I will suggest a theme which may be worked out in your individual ways. What say you to my plan?"

"I am at your Majesty's command," said Will, bowing low, apparently unmoved by this strange whim of the Queen."

"I will lay you a gold guinea, my Lord Bishop," said Elizabeth, "that Anne Hathaway carries off the palm."

Kitchen glanced at Shakespeare, then replied, "Done," much to Her Majesty's surprise.

"You have suddenly turned gambler," she said, "but 'tis a bargain. The fool will hold the stakes and pronounce judgment. Though he be a lack-wit in most things, he is strangely gifted with the poetic muse.

"Anne, come hither. Set your brain to work, and for my guinea's sake contrive your best."

Anne Hathaway stepped demurely forward, her eyes downcast, a heightened color in her cheeks.

"What is your Majesty's theme?" she said.

"Let it be that world-old subject, Anne, that came upon earth with woman, and has ever since been the standard of our sex,—'Love.' "

Anne bowed, then turning toward the two young men, she opened wide her eyes, looking into Shakespeare's face as though she challenged his very soul, and in a clear and melodious voice, which never faltered in its cadence, she cast her defiance at his feet:

"We ask thee, master of thy craft,
Whose mummers mouth at thy command,
What power defies the love-god's shaft
Or 'scapes the darts from his unerring hand?

The humble home, the royal court,
All hold the creatures of his will;
In sooth he finds it mighty sport
Transfixing here a Jack and there a Jill.

The noble lord with lowly dame
Contrives most cunningly to mate;
The lady high, the country swain,
His arrows link, and guide their lifelong fate.

Old age and youth alike do bend
'Neath Cupid's rod and welcome rule,
And dignitaries high attend
His amorous court and weakly play the fool.

We conjure thee, O mighty bard,
To name a greater force on earth;
Love rules the throne, the lowly sward,
Love comes to love with every mortal's birth."

She finished, and stood quietly in front of the Queen, while Elizabeth, her maidens, the churchman, and Shakespeare, and even Southampton gave vent to their pleasure in a round of clapping hands.

"Nobly done, Anne," said the monarch; "you have surpassed yourself to-day. I think I'll hold my guinea safe and lodge its companion in my purse. Ah, Master Shakespeare, 'twas hardly fair to let a woman fling the gauntlet. Her clever catch demands a cunning answer."

Kitchen stood at one side with glum visage, the sight of which caused Pulsifer Kyd to chuckle in great glee.

"Bishop, Bishop," he shouted, "thy fat paunch will be denied a bottle or two of Rhenish wine to make up for thy extravagance. Master Shakespeare, begin, and let your judge be present at your obsequies."

Shakespeare smiled, and looking at the Queen delivered his response in similar strain to the challenge of the maid:

"There is a force on this broad earth
To which my answer doth incline—
Alack we mourn the woeful dearth
Of pilgrims to its meek and lowly shrine.

The student in his narrow cell
Does seek the light it bears above,
A beacon that proclaims full well
Its mastery o'er the fickle reign of love.

To Knowledge I do now refer;
Its arts prepare us to withstand
Fair Cupid's wiles; we do not err,
But penetrate his mask and 'void his hand.

We find repose in Learning's bed,
Oblivion the heart doth hold,
Love loves love out, and love is dead,
The intellect alone is proven gold.

I do maintain and still contend
Love is the creature of an hour,
But Wisdom rules until the end
And this curt maxim proves—'Knowledge is power.'"

For a moment after he had finished his verse there was a hush in the garden. Anne looked at him in amazement, a strange light of admiration for his gifted mind shining for an instant in her beautiful eyes.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" at last spake the Queen, while the jester capered to Kitchen's side and dropped the guineas in his hand, the grin of joy that spread over the Bishop's face causing the lookers-on to laugh heartily.

"'Tis a coin well expended," said Elizabeth. "Master Shakespeare, I cry you quits. Hereafter I will lay my gold on you 'gainst all comers. But the maid's was a praiseworthy verse. My Lord Bishop, we should wed this pair. Their progeny, if it did but take their pattern, would make this the most poetic court in all of Europe."

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The Romance of Gentle Will

"Your Majesty," angrily retorted Anne, "the maiden might have something to say, were she consulted."

"Tut, tut, girl, can you not relish a jest? It seems to me you have been over-rude to Master Shakespeare on other occasions that I now recall."

Anne Hathaway stood for a moment in silence at this rebuke, then suddenly some strange impulse seized her, and crossing rapidly before the Queen she stopped in front of Will, and stretching out her hand, said:

"Master Shakespeare, if I have hurt you by my rudeness, I do now offer you most humble apology. You have taught me a lesson to-day by your forbearance and the gentle usage of your triumph. I extend you my hand in token of my friendship and of my appreciation of a modest man."

In surprise Will grasped the tiny hand, and dropping on one knee he bent to press a kiss upon her finger tips, but she gently withdrew them, saying:

"Nay, bow to your superiors and your Queen. My pride is humbled, gentle sir, and henceforth I shall consider myself thy inferior in station, and promise never to offend thee more."

"Didst ever see a maid so chastened by defeat?" whispered the Queen to Kitchen, as she rose to signify that their hour amongst the roses was ended.

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CHAPTER VIII

A QUEEN'S FAVOURITE

"S-sh, your Majesty! 'tis the hour you asked to be awakened. Speak gently or the other maids will overhear.

Elizabeth, who had been muttering a sleepy protest, opened her eyes, yawned, stretched out her arms, and sat up in her royal bed, looking blankly at Anne, who had for several moments been vigorously shaking her.

"You have a wondrous strength in those slim fingers, girl," she said, ruefully rubbing her shoulder, "but you have been faithful to your trust. I scarce seem to have closed my eyes in sleep when I am aroused by your violent clutching. We must hasten or Dudley will grow impatient at the delay. I doubt not he is even now in the tomb-house, trampling out his impatience on the cold flags, and muttering anathemas over poor Wolsey's sacred bones."

Anne assisted the Queen to dress, and when the toilet was completed she threw a long dark cloak upon Her Majesty's shoulders and drew the hood over her head, which made her look a very commonplace person indeed.

"Have you the key?" asked her mistress, and the girl quickly drew from her pocket an iron ring on

which was fastened an enormous key. Elizabeth nodded and Anne restored it to its hiding-place.

"Now light me a taper, my dear, and precede me in the passage. I would have your beauty shown to its full advantage, that if we should by any accident be seen the blame might fall upon your shoulders. My presence would never be suspected in this uncouth array. 'Tis a cruel subterfuge, Anne, but I know your faithful heart, and the danger is remote. You know that Elizabeth never forgets a service, and I have already denied King Philip's request for your union with his minister."

"Your Majesty is most kind," said the maid, as she curtseyed in gratitude to Her Highness.

"Are any of the maids aroused, Anne?"

"No, I told them yester-eve that you were much fatigued and desired to spend the morning in repose. They sleep soundly and await my summons to attend your robing."

"You are indeed a treasure. It seems that in all my court Anne Hathaway alone proves steadfast; but you bear the secret of my heart in your keeping and it is a mighty trust. You alone of all the subjects in my kingdom hold me in your power, but I do so thoroughly confide in you that I wager you would cut out your tongue ere word of my adventure passed your lips."

"And my heart also, your Majesty. I would freely give my life for you, and dying, would consider myself honored."

"Ah, there is a world of truth in your honest eyes, which look straight into mine with never a flutter of dismay. They form strange contrast to

the drooping lids of my many servile flatterers. I have seen but one pair that can match them, and that but recently, and strange to say they shine from underneath the lofty brow of our new aspirant for fame, the gentle Will Shakespeare."

Anne flushed but said nothing, and the Queen stepped quickly to the wall near the head of her canopied bed. She fumbled for a moment until she pressed a hidden spring, and a secret panel flew open, disclosing a dark passageway that descended abruptly from her apartment.

Elizabeth stepped aside and Anne passed her and entered the corridor, holding high a flickering taper to dissipate the gloom. The Queen followed, closing the panel with a sharp click, and they proceeded, cautiously feeling the way until the candle disclosed a long flight of steps, which they descended and which brought them to a stone-walled tunnel, whose damp blocks were covered with slime, and whose dripping ceiling rendered its passage most distasteful. The Queen shuddered, but they went on until the floor sloped upward and became much dryer, and at last they were brought to a halt by coming in contact with a huge iron door. Anne produced the key and inserted it in the lock, which grated rustily and turned at her pressure. She extinguished her taper and opened the door, while a feeble ray of the gray dawn filtered through a grating opposite them and shed a sickly light upon the dead cardinal's burial-place.

They had entered the famous "tomb-house" constructed by Elizabeth's royal father, Henry the Eighth, for the great Wolsey before the prelate had

fallen into disfavour with his master, but which has stood through the ages as a monument to his fame.

As their eyes became accustomed to the gloom they made out the cloaked figure of a man standing dimly outlined at the head of the tomb.

"Anne, if you will stand apart, and see nothing or hear nothing save the approach of some prying interloper, your Queen will recompense you most liberally."

The maid walked swiftly to the farther side of the roomy vault, and took her station at the grating, with her face pressed to its iron bars and her eyes scanning closely the deserted courtyard and the castle walls.

The Queen threw aside her hood and seated herself upon the low tomb.

"Ah, Robert," said she, "I have kept you waiting."

The man strode quickly to her, and sitting by her side he seized her yielding hand, which he kissed and continued to hold in his strong clasp as he made answer.

"My Queen," said he, "the delay was sweet, for 'twas spent in contemplation of your approach; and the anxiety that troubled my breast, the fear that you would forget your tryst, has made my reward doubly dear."

"Dudley, have I ever broken my word with you?"

"Never, never, Elizabeth. There is one word alone that I have never yet been able to obtain from your dear lips, and that is a final answer to my suit. With you as my wife, and with our combined strength behind the throne, we might even yet become the masters of the world. With Drake upon

the high seas, myself in command of our armies, and your firm hand and steady brain directing the destinies of the royal court, we could form a mighty triumvirate the like of which the world has never known. What say you, my liege? Does it not tempt you to unbend?"

"Leicester, ever since I was a child and the noble Seymour offered his heart and hand to the little princess of scarce fourteen years, I have had suitors by the score, princes and kings, ministers and earls, courtiers and fools; but never until you burst upon my life like the fierce sun upon the purple morning-glory's eager breast have I been wooed by a man. I am sore tempted by your pleading, and though my heart finds ready answer my good sense holds me in restraint."

"Elizabeth, my dear love, will you ever cease to be a slave to your one idea of the divine right of kings? Admitting I am of lowly birth I have risen to the heights of fame through my own untiring zeal. I have even made my impress on your queenly heart, and what need we care for the opinion of the world? Full many times ere this considerations of rank have bowed before the promptings of love, and kings and queens have taken as their consorts persons of most humble station. And history has yet to show us wherein such marriage has been attended by unhappiness.

"Ah, Elizabeth, let your soul whisper through your loving lips the truth which I see shining in your eyes. Come to me, my love. I care not for your throne. 'Twere better far were Mary Stuart at the helm to banish you to some distant shore,

where I could woo you and thence remove my own considerable household, which I'd place beneath your sway and let you rule forever, not England's, but Leicester's Queen."

"In faith, you plead well, Dudley; I am like to lose my reason in this dismal tomb. Know you not that Philip II most ardently does demand my hand? I have kept him at bay for a month past, but I can put him off no longer. He refuses to submit to the delay, and presses me to give him answer straightforward. Would it be politic to antagonize so powerful a monarch?"

The Queen felt Leicester's form stiffen at her side.

"Bess," he said, "I pray God a better fate awaits you than marriage with this Spanish fiend. You know the dreadful tortures his cruelties inflicted upon his victims of the Inquisition, and his vile sanction of the *au-to-da-fé*. His yellow face, his evil eyes gloating upon your queenly form, and his greedy heart desiring the wealth of your broad lands, so sicken me that at times when I see him sitting, an uncouth mass of flesh, at your right hand, I am sore tempted to unsheathe my sword and plunge it into his wicked breast."

"But," mused Elizabeth, "he might find he had lost his power did I but consent to take his hand. Methinks 'twould be a royal game to tame this monarch; he'd find for once a woman's will was stronger than his own."

"Nay, nay, my Queen. He'd be thy humble slave as long as it did suit him to thus act, but when he had annexed your throne and sown the seeds of his Catholicism most broadly in your Protestant

land, he'd then flash forth his Satan's hand; and I am as certain that he would have you slain if you did attempt to balk his plans as I am that I love you with all the vigour of my troubled soul.

"Elizabeth, Elizabeth, dismiss him to his Spanish throne; 'tis even dangerous that he lingers in your court. Why, but yesterday I overheard the Duke of Alva and the minister, Don Gomez, conversing in Spanish, of which they thought my mind was ignorant. I could catch but a word here and there, but the Queen of Scots' and Norfolk's name fell often from their lips. Who knows what scheme their fertile brains may be contriving in reference to your fair prisoner? We'd better have them watched, Elizabeth."

"Let him take care, Dudley, how he meddles at my court!" angrily replied the Queen. "He will awaken a demon in my breast that is not easily subdued. He is in my stronghold now, and his armies are in distant Spain; he is like to find himself in the same predicament as his victims of the Inquisition." She shook off Leicester's hand and arose, stamping her foot and pacing back and forth in the narrow vault in her fury.

A gleam of joy flashed in Leicester's eyes but he spoke in soothing tones:

"Nay, Elizabeth, the torture is a relic of bygone years, and this is a more civilized court than that of barbaric Spain, but you may send him scuttling to his home with a message in his ear that will keep the sea forever between you."

"Robert, my ministers do plead most strongly for this union. Sir Thomas Hatton, my chancellor,

is set on it; Walter Raleigh and Amias Paulet recognize the advantage of so powerful an ally to our forces; and did not this question of religion intervene I am sure I could not hope to 'scape the enormous pressure that would be brought upon me from all sides. Though he would be husband in name alone, for as I have told you, if I am to be joined to a man I do not love I would soon show him what it cost to secure the reins of power."

"Then you confess that you would avoid this match?"

"Leicester, I am but a woman after all. Do not press me further," she said, and leaned weakly against the tomb, resting her elbow on its marble slab.

The Earl dropped to his knee and seized her hand, a world of passion throbbing in his voice as he pleaded his cause:

"O Bess, my darling Queen, my heart's desire! can you not see that I am near mad for love of thee? Away with thoughts of rank and fame. Let love outshine them all and make of this damp tomb a monument in the temple of my memory to designate the hour of your surrender. Come! Come! Let me hold you in my arms, and with kisses hot upon our lips we'll plight our troth, while the shade of your father's great Cardinal nods approval, though we see him not."

He attempted to draw her to him, but she sadly shook her head.

"Robert," said she, "we are both of us past the prime of life, though you look not your age by twenty years. Our hearts alone are young, but our

bodies are not proof against the ravages of time. Why, the extremest art of my hand-maidens is required to restore the roses to my cheeks, to arch my lips, and to smooth the wrinkles that come on apace, and they do deftly dress my hair, most cunningly concealing here and there a streak of gray.

"Ah! Dudley, Dudley! We are a pair of fools. I've known you long and reverenced you much, but I must say 'twere better far that we were in our beds, displaying the sense that is due us through our years by seeking peaceful slumber. Alas! I was romantic ever, and will be until I die."

Dudley arose and stood before his Queen.

"Elizabeth," said he, "you know full well the outer shell counts naught with me. Despite your years you are still more beautiful than all the ladies of your court to my eyes. 'Tis your soul of souls that I worship. Our hearts have been in close communion since first we met, and you are my Queen, and I am your King by all the laws of nature and of love, though we may never appear as such in the eyes of the world.

"What matters it that we may never give our progeny to England to consummate a line of Kings that, bred in loving wedlock instead of royally arranged affairs of state, inheriting the better qualities of their sire and noble dam, would change the history of our land and revolutionize the world? What matters it that we may never know the loving touch of infant hands upon our silvering locks, that we may never hear the sound of childish voices calling us to join them in their sports? We'll have each other forever and for aye. Elizabeth, deny your

heart no longer, but take shelter on my breast, the only one in all your court that is sincere."

His eyes filled and he could speak no more, but opened wide his arms in passionate appeal to the Queen.

Elizabeth faltered and seemed about to turn away, but her love for the handsome Earl surged upon her in all its mighty force, o'erleaping her reason, and taking possession of her very soul. She fought against its influence for a space, but it was too strong, and with a happy sigh she bowed her head and fell into her lover's eager arms.

He gave a glad cry of exultant joy, and lifting her dear face rained fervent kisses upon her submissive lips.

"At last! At last! My Queen!" he murmured. "Your King shall go home now, but he will sail without his bride. Let me hear your dear lips once proclaim the old sweet token of all womankind."

Elizabeth looked up, her moist eyes shining like twin stars.

"Robert, I love thee! I love thee! I love thee!" she repeated, and caressed his face with her gentle hands.

"And you will be my wife, my love?"

The Queen looked into his eyes long before she answered:

"Robert, you have won your conquest of my heart this morning, and I have freely confessed my love for you. I swear to you o'er this sacred grave that I will never marry other man but you; but let me have one year of respite ere I give answer to your second prayer."

" 'Tis an eternity, my love!" he argued.

"Nay, 'twill pass quickly; and Dudley, do not fear, my heart tells me, though I will not allow my lips to frame, our future fate."

He folded her in his loving embrace as Anne, who had been peering anxiously through the grating, uttered a warning "S-sh!"

"Your Majesty," said she, "windows are opening in the palace, and the courtyard is becoming peopled with the guard."

"I must leave you, Dudley," said the Queen. "Some inquisitive soldier may take it into his head to peep into the vault."

"Must our period of bliss end so soon, my love? 'Tis but seldom that we are allowed to hold our tryst, and even here we are attended by your discreet maid. My heart is hungry for your company. Might I not be custodian of the key to yon iron door that I might gain access to your presence when my love could no longer be denied?"

Elizabeth gently shook her head as she looked at him with an expression of reproach in her loving eyes.

"My Lord," said she, "I've lost my heart, but I will keep my honour."

He bowed low at her rebuke and gently kissed her hand.

Anne lighted the taper and entered the passage-way. Elizabeth drew on her hood and followed, and as the iron door clanged and the bolt was shot, Leicester stood with folded arms until their footfalls died away.

Anne and Her Majesty entered the secret panel, and the maid drew off her mistress's cloak and hastily concealed it behind a tapestry. She then assisted her to disrobe, and when the other maids appeared at her summons to assist in Her Majesty's toilet, their Queen was sitting up in her silken bed, yawning and smiling sleepily at their deferential greetings.

CHAPTER IX

THE CHANCELLOR AND THE FOOL

The day of the Queen's great festival upon the Thames had arrived and the river was dotted with myriads of boats and barges, decked in gay colors, and flying banners adorned with the royal arms. Workmen were putting the finishing touches to an enormous stage that was built upon a score of floats firmly lashed together, and the whole structure was anchored to the farther bank by a massive chain at either corner. It was festooned with wires, from which were hung innumerable torches and painted lanterns for its illumination in the evening. The trees upon the shore formed a sylvan background, and a novel green-room where the actors might await their cues.

The royal court was to be entertained by Will Shakespeare's latest play, a ballad of the forest, in which were many gnomes and mystic sprites, the denizens of the leafy world, who were ever Elizabeth's favourite characters. 'Twas predicted that the famous bard had outdone himself in this last creation, and the courtiers were a-buzz with whispered prophecies and excited expectations of the evening's pleasure.

The royal barge was tied directly opposite the stage, and it had been draped with handsome tapes-

tries and provided with many seats and covered canopies to insure the comfort of the Queen and her suite.

As its decoration had been completed, there were none on board save an armed guardsman of Sir Walter Raleigh's company, who had been stationed there to keep away the curious and to protect the rich draperies from thieving vandals who might attend the festival.

However, the morning sun beat down fiercely upon the river, and it was deserted save by the workmen upon the platform; and the guardsman, who was none other than our friend Roger Covert, yawned and seated himself upon the step of the Queen's dais. He fanned his face with his broad hat and muttered imprecations 'gainst the heat.

"'Tis beastly luck," said he, "that I was picked to watch this craft. The sun will be low ere I shall be relieved, and there's never a morsel of food or drop to drink aboard, and no way in which to obtain the same. There's not a soul in sight, nor like to be any. This bobbing float is as safe as though 'twere in the mighty sea. I'll lay me down in the shade of the royal tapestry, but will keep my eyes and ears wide open that I may discover the approach of some spying varlet who might contrive a reprimand for me from my captain. I wish my laundress were here with me to beguile the weary hours away. But I will most strictly live up to my old name, and will be Roger 'Under Cover' in sooth." So saying, he let down a canvas canopy at one corner of the barge, thus forming a narrow space between the awning and the tapestry at the rear,

and crawled therein, leaving the canvas raised an inch or two, so that he might survey the winding river.

"Ah, there is comfort," said he. "I'll rest my weary bones, and natheless be on guard, and will be freshened for the eventide's delights."

He lay for a long time and nothing occurred to interrupt the current of his thoughts. The cool repose of his retreat brought drowsiness to his lids, and he caught himself blinking and nodding in his efforts to conquer his desire to sleep.

"This will never do," he said, stretching himself. "I must walk upon the deck again or I will prove false to my trust." He was about to arise when his eye caught the flash of an oar some little distance down the river, and he lay still, peering 'neath the awning in sleepy wonderment.

"Why, 'tis a boat, and heading this way," he said. "I'll bide a while."

As the craft came nearer his eyes opened wide in astonishment, and he gave a low whistle of surprise.

"That villain Cordes. And the jester is his oarsman. There must be some deviltry afoot."

The boat drew up to the barge and the fool passed a cord around the canopy's rod, and the pair clambered on board.

"We are in luck," said Pulsifer Kyd, "the float is deserted."

"Ah, 'tis a great barge. There will be many nobles to-night on board," said the Spaniard.

"If you could speak the Queen's English more smoothly, you and I might get along better," snapped the jester.

The Spaniard shrugged his shoulders but said nothing.

"My master wants a man he can depend upon to do a dangerous piece of work, and casting about for a tool he came to me, who suddenly took thought of your foul visage, and suggested you to him. I know not full particulars as yet, but it is a matter of disposing of a certain person who is an obstacle in his path.

"Can you be counted on, even to the taking of a life?"

"I will kill a many men if he does make much reward."

"You need have no fear; he'll pay you well and will get you safely out of England. Can you swim?"

"Like a water snake."

"By my faith, you look the part. But we must hasten. He'll have a boat a hundred yards down stream, and if you reach it your safety is assured. I am to meet him in the Queen's deserted throne-room an hour before the set of sun, and there I will be given the details of his plan. Join me in the scullery when the attendants are at table and I will disclose the plot."

The Spaniard nodded his assent, and after an inspection of the rear bank, and several muttered directions on the part of the fool, they clambered over the side and pushed off the boat, rowing swiftly for the shore.

Roger could scarce control his excitement until the villains had hauled their craft upon the bank and had disappeared in opposite directions beneath

the trees. Then he scrambled forth hastily and paced up and down the deck of the barge, his drowsiness entirely dissipated by the startling visit of the evil pair.

"An hour before sunset, in the throne-room," he muttered. "Well, Roger 'Under Cover' will be there, though it will necessitate a swift stretch of my legs and a woful neglect of my belly if my relief is late."

He sought no more his cool retreat, but spent the remainder of the day on the unshaded deck, occasionally moistening his parched lips with his tongue, and cursing at his carelessness in neglecting to provide himself with food and drink.

The hours passed with interminable slowness, and when the boat arrived, bringing the soldier who was to stand watch until the arrival of the royal party, he fairly leapt upon him, snatching his flask and draining its contents despite his angry protests. Then he jumped into the boat, cursing and shouting to the startled oarsmen to make haste. His action had the desired effect, for they pulled like mad, thinking that he had become crazed by the heat of the sun, and fearing that he would leap into the river before they reached the shore.

Ere the bow of the boat touched the landing he was out, and wading knee-deep in the water, rushed up the bank and through the trees as though the Devil were after him, then cursed himself again and again as he realized that his wet boots would leave a tell-tale trail.

He hurried to his quarters, and throwing them aside, drew on a dry pair over his damp hose, then

skirted the barracks wall and darted unnoticed into one of the many doorways of the castle.

He threaded the winding corridors until he came to the main hall, then tiptoed cautiously to the entrance of the throne-room, and could hardly keep from shouting in his delight at finding it empty.

He ran across the polished floor until he arrived at the dais of the throne. Clearing its steps at a bound, he darted behind the heavy arras in the rear, and clutching its folds leaned against the paneled wall and panted heavily.

He had barely got his breath when the odd figure of the jester pranced in at the door and capered toward the throne. The shrewd rogue was grimacing and muttering silly rhymes in case some unwelcome member of the royal household should walk in upon him, for he knew that he was considered a privileged person, and that his presence in the room would be attributed to some strange freak of his misshapen brain.

He stopped in front of the throne, then after a moment climbed the steps and seated himself in the Queen's allotted place, crossing his legs and bobbing his head as he crooned a meaningless tune. Covert stealthily drew aside the arras to watch the grotesque fool, but dropped it quickly as he saw the tall figure of a man step through the entrance. The stranger turned and drew the hangings, then strode rapidly to the throne.

Kyd stretched out his hand in mock anger, reciting:

"My Chancellor is late,
What can he mean?
Most humbly bend your knee,
I am thy Queen."

"Have done with your fooling!" angrily said the new-comer, "we are here on sterner business. Hast seen the Spaniard?"

"Yes, Sir Thomas," said the jester, laying aside his buffoonery, and speaking as intelligently as the nobler conspirator. "I had him on the royal barge to-day and explained to him all I knew of your plan."

"Did he agree to it?"

"Yes, my Lord, you can buy him body and soul for a few pounds. 'Twill be good to get him out of the country before he slits the throats of more of us. I am to meet him at the scullery in an hour and there will post him as to the final details. You know you have kept me in the dark concerning your intended victim."

"Pulsifer, it were not the part of wisdom to name our man until the compact has been sealed, but attend me close and carry out my directions and you will not go unrewarded."

"I am your slave," said the jester, as he folded his hands.

The Chancellor placed his foot upon the step and leaned his elbow upon his knee as he proceeded in a low voice, which was distinctly audible to the hidden guardsman, with his nefarious scheme.

"Kyd," said he, "as you know, my suit of the Lady Anne Hathaway was progressing most favourably until it received a sudden check by the arrival

of this romantic playwright at court. I know not if she loves him, and 'tis certain that he seems too deeply immersed in the production of his plays to give much heed to the caprices of Cupid, but the day of his advent marked a change in her demeanor toward me.

"Previously she was all smiles, and welcomed my approach with merry jest and my sallies with maid-
enly repartee; but now she avoids me at every turn, and though I have sought speech with her for a month, I have never once met with success."

"She must be bewitched, my Lord."

"By my faith, fool, I believe she is. But you know full well how dangerous it is to balk my plans. I am as determined to wed the fickle maid as I am that this interloper shall witness his last triumph to-night. The programme is this, Pulsifer: To-night I am in charge of the disposition of the Queen's suite upon the royal barge. I have so arranged that this fellow, Shakespeare, will be seated at an extreme corner of the float in company with several of the Queen's ladies, while Raleigh, Essex, and the other courtiers will rest at some distance across the platform. We will dress Cordes in the garb of an attendant and let him stand at his victim's elbow.

"During the final tableau of the play, while the attention of the courtiers is riveted upon the stage, let him quickly stab the poet to the heart, and leaping backward into the river, draw the body with him and the waves of the Thames will make final disposition of this stumbling-block in my path. He may then swim down stream, where the sailors will await

him, all ignorant of his deed, and will carry him and his reward on board of a trading-vessel which sets sail for Spain with the morning tide."

"What recompense will you make him, and how are we to deliver it to him?"

"'Tis worth a hundred pounds, Kyd. The price is cheap if it will bring me my bride, and I'll draw it on Elizabeth's coffers, and charge it to expenses of the festival. 'Twill be a grim jest, Pulsifer."

"Aye, but whose hand will convey it to Fernando?"

"That will be your duty. 'Tis the one sticking-point. If you pay him in advance, think you that the Spaniard will carry out his contract?"

"My master, I will answer for that. We'll own his soul by your lavish expenditure. Besides, his evil heart does so delight in the love of killing that I swear he would not forego the joy of twisting his knife in Will Shakespeare's back and dying his saffron hands in the playwright's blood, for the doubling of his bounty."

"'Tis well, Pulsifer. I will place the amount in your hands, and you may secretly deliver it to him in the scullery. But have him closely guarded until he is placed upon the barge. He may fall victim to a craving for the wine-cup, and expend a portion of his wealth in wild carousing, and thus undo our hopes."

"You may trust me, Sir Thomas. I am indeed a silly fool before the court, but it takes a wise man to pull the wool over their eyes, and they suspect me not. Get me the purse, my Lord, that I may keep my tryst in the kitchen betimes."

The jester slid down from the throne, and Hatton thought a moment before replying:

"Wait here, Pulsifer," he said, "and I will hasten by the private stairway to the vaults of the royal cofferer. He will not question my order for the funds, and I will return forthwith."

He quickly mounted the dais and stepped to Roger's hiding-place, laying his hand upon the arras to draw it aside.

Covert's heart leapt into his throat and he clutched the hilt of his sword, determined to slay the Chancellor and his jester too, for he knew that discovery would mean his quick and certain death if Hatton was spared breath enough to give an order.

As the folds wrinkled in Sir Thomas's hand Roger straightened himself to deliver the fatal blow, but a sudden interruption came from the jester. "My Lord," he whispered, "'twould be safer to take the longer way. You might meet some secret messenger of the Queen upon the stairway, and 'twould attract suspicion, as you are known to be directing the arrangements on the river."

"True, true, Pulsifer," said Sir Thomas, dropping the arras; "in sooth, you are no fool. I will go boldly through the castle, where none dare question me, and you may wait in my apartment for the purse."

He left the dais, and accompanied by Kyd, proceeded across the floor and out of the doorway, while Roger Covert heaved a mighty sigh of relief.

"Whew, but it was a close shave!" he muttered; and after waiting a sufficient interval to avoid all chance of being seen by the villains, he left his

hiding-place and quickly quitted the scene of the foul conspiracy. He hurried to Will Shakespeare's rooms and was lucky enough to find him in. Will looked up in wonderment at his troubled visage.

Forgetting all respect he threw himself on a seat by the window, saying :

"O Master Shakespeare, I can now somewhat repay you for the kindness you did a poor varlet when you carried him home and healed his wounds, full many months ago!"

"What do you mean, Roger? 'Twas nothing, and 'twas trebly repaid the day you saved Earl Dudley on the highway."

"Nay, but this is a serious matter, master. I overheard a plot between the Queen's Lord Chancellor and her fool to have you killed during the entertainment on the Thames to-night."

Shakespeare paled, and he eyed the guardsman, wondering if he had become suddenly bereft of his sense.

"'Tis God's truth," said Roger; and he related from beginning to end the details of the dastardly scheme.

"Now, my master," he said, "if you will seek Mistress Hathaway and tell her all, she may quickly place the Queen in possession of the facts, and their plans will be thwarted, and my Lord Hatton may find a clear path to the headsman's block, while you may be free to woo Mistress Anne."

Shakespeare's form stiffened at this phase of the case, and he shortly made answer :

"Nay, Roger, I refuse to take such base advantage. There must be another way to escape their treachery."

"The time is too short. All the nobles, with the exception of the Queen's escort, have already left the castle."

"Then, Roger, I command you to seal your lips. We will attend the festival as though nothing had happened, and take our allotted places on the barge. Forewarned will be forearmed, and as we know the moment of his intended treachery, we may easily avoid his hand."

"Nay, Master Will, you will be slain. What chance have you against this Spanish desperado, with knife in hand, intent upon your life? You will be in the midst of a bevy of panic-stricken women who will hamper your movements, and he may strike you down and make his escape ere any of the royal guards can reach your side. I beseech you, let me carry this message to Mistress Hathaway myself."

"Roger, you know me well enough to abide by my command when once 'tis given. I assure you I will be alert, and something tells me I am to be reserved for a better fate. As the hour of the entertainment is drawing near, I beg that you will break your fast, and then attend me, that I may be quickly garbed for my departure to the royal barge."

"I have no mind for eating, Master Will," said Roger. "I am sore afraid that I will lose you, and I must contrive in some way to be near at hand."

Shakespeare insisted, however, and he gloomily left the room.

Will sat in his chair, musing over the warning of the faithful guardsman, and planning how to avoid the dagger of the assassin.

In a few moments he heard heavy footsteps in the passage, and Roger entered, bearing a bundle wrapped in his soldier's cloak.

He kneeled on the floor and proceeded to unroll the garment.

"Have you dined so quickly?" asked Shakespeare.

"Nay, master, I have been better employed," he said, as he shook out the folds of the cloak. "Here is a steel shirt of mail that I found in the armory, and which I spirited away. I pray you, let me array you in this good armor. 'Twill never be suspected 'neath your jerkin, and your serving-man will witness your play with calmer nerves. Perhaps a Spanish knife may dull its flashing point to-night."

Will laughingly arose, and his faithful squire assisted him to dress, putting on the mailed shirt, which fitted him closely, and carefully concealing its gleaming links 'neath the folds of his velvet blouse and heavy cloak.

CHAPTER X

A STRANGE FISH IN THE THAMES

In a dingy little shop in Prince's Lane, close to the rear wall of the Blackfriar's Playhouse, a venerable Jew was diligently dusting his wares and querulously muttering to himself.

"By the beard of Moses! never in my memory was there such a season. Here I lay me in such fine masks, such expensive robes, such glittering costumes, and I think me that the great noblemen will crowd my shop in their eagerness to purchase my disguises, but it is already the eve of the festival, and not one of all the court has come to visit me. Except a few papier-mache heads for the play-actors I have sold nothing, absolutely nothing."

"In other years my little room was filled at this hour with bartering courtiers, who hesitated not to pay my price for these odd conceits. Mayhap they've changed the vogue and do not masque as formerly. Do they become straight-laced and give up their pursuit of the coy damsels of the court, and direct their sober attention to the performance on the stage?"

"Ach! I lose me much moneys. My profits of two seasons I expend, and I think me I will get rich quick, but I am fooled, fooled, fooled! O Abraham, your gray head has lost its cunning. I grow old, and keep not up with the changing times."

He was interrupted by the sound of galloping hoofs in the distance, and hobbling up to the door, was just in time to see a horseman dash furiously into the lane and make directly for his door.

The rider, who was a soldier of the Queen's guard, reined his steed up with a jerk, and leaping off his back strode into the shop, the Jew bowing and cringing servilely before him.

"Ah, my fine gentleman," he said, "vat can I do for you? Shall I show you a domino or a disguise for the festival to-night? Surely a noble lord like yourself will wish to buy something handsome to beguile the pretty damsels, eh?"

"Enough of your flattery, old crook-nose. You know as well as I do that I am nothing but a common guardsman. You need not try to wheedle me out of my purse by use of your high-sounding titles."

"Vell," said the Jew, his countenance falling a little, "I have cheap masks, too, if you will deign to look at them."

"Trot out your stock, Abraham. I have ridden hard from Windsor Castle, and I must be at my station on the river ere the last act of Shakespeare's play. I keep tryst with a maiden, and I am like to lose her love if I appear not at the appointed time. The carnival is to be held on the water after the show. Hast anything appropriate to mask me for its merry crew, and to give me a pleasing aspect in the eyes of my maid?"

"Ah, yes, your lordship," said the wily Jew, pulling out some shopworn figures. "See. I have here such a fine frog, and here a lizard, and here a snake, any one of them suitable to appear on the barges;

and if in the merry-making they should fall into the water their skin coverings will dry quickly and they will not be spoiled."

"Good," muttered the guardsman, under his breath.

"See. You put them on over the head, so ; and put the arms into the reptile's legs, so. By the beard of the Prophet! 'tis as natural as life. 'Tis just what you want, noble captain."

"Hold a bit, old skinflint, and captain me not. Dost think to pass off your bruised and battered and ill-fitting head-pieces on a royal guardsman? Bring forth something worth my while, or I will lay the flat of my sword on your bony shoulders ere I take my leave."

"Ah, you would not be so cruel, young master. But stay. I think me of two figures which I did but yesterday buy at heavy cost, but which I sell you cheap. You are such a pleasing gentleman, and either one would become you much, and make your lady the envy of all the maskers."

So saying, he went to the rear of the shop and returned with two enormous bundles, which he unrolled, and displayed to the guardsman two monster fishes' heads, one green and one gold, with rolling eyes and fins attached to conceal the arms of the wearer, and tight-fitting elastic cloth, matching in color, to pull down as far as the doublet of the masker. The soldier's eyes sparkled at sight of them, which did not escape the notice of the Jew.

"See," he said, holding one up. "They are as light as feathers." He drew the mask over the guardsman's head, and fitted his arms into the fins, the

hands passing through an ingenious contrivance on the under side which gave them perfect freedom of action without their being seen. He then led him to a dingy mirror and descanted on the beauties of the monster.

"Oh such a fine figure! See the eye-holes in the throat where you can look out, and the opening through which you can breathe. Why, 'tis made so, if the masker wishes, he may enter the water, and breathing through a reed which passes upward to the fish's nose, he may disport himself as a monster of the deep, and greatly mystify the startled beholders."

The guardsman drew off the green head, and holding it in his hands addressed the Jew:

"Name your price, Abraham."

"Well, I paid me five and twenty pounds, but I was disappointed in their sale, and as the hour for the festival draws close, it shall be yours for twenty, no more, no less."

"Twenty devils, old Israelite! Dost think I am a fool? I'd best mount my horse and hie me to the carnival unmasked"; and the soldier turned on his heel.

"Stay, master," said the Jew, "I had my mind upon the wrong fish. 'Twas the gold one that was twenty pounds, the coloring costs much more. You shall have the green one for ten, and I lose me half the cost."

"I'll give you five pounds for the head. Come now, Jew, is it a bargain?"

"Seven pounds, or I wrap them up," said Abraham, stooping to draw the coverings over the masks.

"By the Gods!" threatened the impatient guardsman, "you'll change me the monster for my five pounds, or I will take it from you by force and gag you with my sword belt and bind your skinny claws with my stirrup-leather. Besides, 'tis all I have, and low sale is better than no sale. 'Tis your last chance. Speak, ere I pull your musty robe over your ancient pate."

Abraham held up his hands in mock horror. "Shades of my forefathers!" said he, "I disgrace their memory. But you are not to be resisted, gentle master. The fish is yours. I shall bind it with stout cord that you may carry it safely to the river."

The exchange was made quickly, and as the soldier spurred away furiously with the bundle fastened to the saddle behind him, the Jew rubbed his hands and emitted a happy chuckle.

"Not so bad, not so bad," he muttered. "It profits me four pounds clear. 'Tis a balm to my disappointment and an incense that will make my sleep peaceful to-night."

The guardsman galloped through the dark and narrow streets with little thought of mercy for his faithful steed, whose heavy breathing indicated that he had already traveled far and fast. At last they entered the road that stretched along the bank of the Thames, extending far southwest toward the castle. The moon was peeping over the gently waving tree-tops and the river reflected its soft radiance and served to light up the deserted highway.

With a murmur of thankfulness for the dissipation of the darkness, and a muttered prayer that he might be in time, the guardsman leaned far over his

horse's neck, sparing him not, but spurring him on and on, until at last the dark walls of the castle loomed up in the distance. He entered the barracks gate and turned his jaded steed loose in the yard. The animal, with unerring instinct, sought the open stable and the company of his tethered mates, while his rider threw his saddle on a pile of trappings, and clasping his precious bundle in his arms hastened to the river, seeking a secluded spot on the bank at a little distance above the scene of the festival.

He drew a small canoe from its hiding-place in the thick foliage, and casting his burden into the boat took his seat in the stern and swiftly paddled out into the murky stream. He rested on his oars at a point where the tall trees cast a deep shadow on the water and which was some three hundred yards above the royal barge. He could hear the sounds of merry laughter and could see the actors on the stage, though he could not distinguish their voices. He judged that the performance was drawing near its close, and hastily seized the stone which was used as an anchor, swiftly paying out the restraining rope until its slack denoted that the bottom was reached.

As the boat swayed with the tide he unwrapped his bundle and pulled off his jack-boots and his jerkin and doublet. Throwing them in the bottom of the canoe he fitted the fish's head upon his shoulders, drew the elastic cloth closely around his waist, adjusted the fins so that he might have the freedom of his arms, and assuring himself that his dagger was in his belt, he closed his teeth upon the air-admitting reed and dropped quietly into the water,

swimming with swift but silent strokes in the direction of the Queen's float.

After Roger Covert had assisted Will Shakespeare to robe himself for the festival he hastily left the room and disappeared in the courtyard, much to his master's wonderment, who finally decided that he had departed thus abruptly to stay the pangs of hunger caused by his long vigil on the float.

Will proceeded to the landing and joined the Queen's suite, and ere long the oarsmen transported them to the barge. The royal train was seated according to Sir Thomas Hatton's plan, and its members were soon busily discussing the wonders of the festive scene and expressing their anticipation of the delights of the play.

Shakespeare was much envied by the noble gallants, for he sat close to a bevy of the Queen's ladies, who conversed eagerly with him, questioning him about the performance and slyly plaguing him for his modesty. Anne Hathaway was in an extremely gracious mood. She forbore to enter into the other maidens' jests, but spoke frequently to him, calling his attention to the beauties of the many floats and the thousands of sparkling lights that dotted the river and its banks.

The Queen noticed the attention her hand-maiden was bestowing upon the poet and she turned her sharp eyes toward Sir Thomas Hatton, scanning him closely for a sign of disapproval; but for once in his life his brow had lost its scowl and he was smiling blandly, apparently oblivious of Anne's presence on the float. The Queen was puzzled, but soon forgot

the twain and entered into an animated discussion with the Earl of Leicester, who was seated at her left hand. The King of Spain occupied his usual station on her right, and sat moodily biting his lips and gnawing his beard, apparently unnoticed by the other members of Her Majesty's suite.

The rise of the curtain was long delayed, and at last a silence fell upon the occupants of the barge and they awaited eagerly the opening of the play. The jester, seated on the step at Leicester's feet, began mouthing and grimacing to draw attention to himself, and soon raised his uncanny voice and hummed a weird tune.

Elizabeth clutched Leicester's arm as she listened to his strange refrain, and the courtiers ceased their whisperings and attended with straining ears. The fool's voice sang louder and louder, and this much of his tune was audible to the Queen :

"A humorous wight I know,
And one you much despise;
'Tis said that he
All royalty
Most openly decries.

His occupation odd
Is tasting queenly fare.
If poison lies
Within the pies,
He quickly dies, so there.

Your Majesty is safe;
But count him not a fool,
He keeps a cat
To nibble at
The viands fat, a rule

That augurs very well
For his life and full years;
And thus you see
He tastes boldly,
His stomach free from fears.

The danger does not lie
At this cute varlet's door,
But in your suite
Is found the root
Of intrigue's fruit galore.

Your Majesty, I pray,
'Gainst treachery take pains,
And count above
Pretended love
The poison of men's brains."

He ceased and blinked his little eyes, swaying his body back and forth, and looking at the courtiers in expectation of applause, until his glance fell upon my Lord Hatton's face, which wore an ominous frown, at which he quickly subsided and sat motionless at Dudley's feet. The Queen looked at him with an expression of anger.

"Who has been putting you up to this, fool?" she questioned. Surely some rhymester has been drumming this warning, if warning it be, into your shallow memory."

"Nay, your Majesty," answered the jester, "'twas writ for me by a little fellow whom I have known since birth, though he has ever been the inmate of a narrow prison cell. And he is much my friend, though I have never set eyes upon him."

"You mystify us, Kyd, by your mouthing. Unriddle us this fancy of your crooked brain."

"'Tis the same tiny prisoner to whom I do refer, your Majesty, that misshapen brain of mine. The words are his own and his prison is my bony skull. What think you of the simile, your Majesty?"

The Queen laughed heartily and, turning to Leicester, said:

"This only goes to show how crazed the varlet is, my Lord, though in truth his strange conceit does deserve some attention. He amuses me much at times and is a welcome addition to the court."

"Mayhap he is not so much of a fool as he looks," answered Dudley, who had been closely scrutinizing Pulsifer's stupid features.

The jester's sharp ears overheard his reply, and he stuck out his tongue drolly and wriggled his ears until the Queen chuckled in delight.

"Nonsense, Leicester," said she, "he is an absolute idiot. Didst ever see such a mask? If he but had his senses he would be a valuable addition to Master Shakespeare's company of players. There's never a gnome nor a sprite in the whole band with so uncouth a figure. But the performance is much delayed. Let a trumpet be sounded to signify our impatience."

Leicester summoned a herald to his side and gave him a whispered command. The man stood apart and blew three long blasts on his horn, and the curtain of the stage was quickly pulled aside and a head was thrust out. The blasts were repeated and the head was suddenly withdrawn, and at the end of a very brief interval the curtain was raised and the performance began.

Like Shakespeare's first comedy it immediately caught the attention of the audience, and his success was more than duplicated, the smiling faces and the glances of envy that were turned in his direction affording ample proof of his rise to fame.

The sun shines on us in our prosperity, but let our popularity once wane and e'en the cold rays of the lesser lights are turned away, and we are compelled to seek comfort in the warm bed of our memory.

A motionless attendant, dressed in the attire of a page, stood near the bevy of maids of honour and directly behind Shakespeare's seat. His dark face contrasted strangely with his gorgeous doublet and hose, but Sir Thomas Hatton had advised dressing Fernando in this garb and stationing him on the barge as a mark of respect to the Spanish King.

As the play progressed the Lord Chancellor watched him narrowly, and a meaning flash from the villain's eyes assured him that he would act his part.

The last scene of the play was coming to a close when a queer-looking snout was thrust out of the water near the corner of the barge and directly beneath Cordes's station. It was all unobserved by the occupants of the float, so enthralled were they in the wonderful play.

As the final tableau was being formed the Spaniard drew his knife, and raising it on high struck Shakespeare a terrific blow beneath the shoulder; but as the two broken pieces of his dagger fell to the floor of the barge and bounded off into the dark river, he felt himself clutched round the ankles in an iron grasp, and as he fell into the water with a

mighty splash he gave vent to a piercing scream that filled the souls of all on board with terror. They turned to ascertain the cause of their fright, but the Spaniard had disappeared, the river was still, and Shakespeare said nothing to enlighten them.

Suddenly Anne Hathaway, who had arisen in her alarm, and was standing by her chair, screamed excitedly and pointed down the stream:

"Look! Look! A monster fish! And as the Queen and courtiers turned their eyes to where she gazed they saw the scaly head of a terrible denizen of the deep rise far out of the water, its red jaws and rolling eyes, causing their hearts to become sick with fear, and they caught a glimpse of Fernando's limp form in its clutches, and saw the red blood streaming from his pallid throat.

As they stared in horror the fish slowly sank beneath the waves and they never saw the monster or his victim more.

Of all on the royal barge Sir Thomas Hatton seemed the most affected, and even the Queen rallied him on his state of collapse. He answered not, but entered the first of the boats that carried the royal party to the shore, and hastily made his way to his own apartment in the castle.

Some three hundred yards up the stream, in a boat under the shadow of a tree, a royal guardsman drew the papier-mache head of an enormous green fish over the shoulders of a dead Spaniard, then taking the heavy stone that served as an anchor, he fastened it securely to the body, winding the rope tightly around the stiffening corpse, and lifted anchor,

mask, and man over the rail, silently watched the ripples that closed forever above the villain's form.

He then turned and counted some gold coins which he had taken from his victim, and as he dropped them in his pouch he chuckled heartily in his glee.

"'Tis more money than I ever possessed in all my life before. Roger Covert is richer by one hundred pounds for this night's work," he said. Then drawing on his jack-boots and jerkin, he lifted his oars and silently rowed away.

CHAPTER XI

AT THE WHIPPING Post

A feeble ray of the early morning sun shone on a deserted corner of the courtyard which was piled high with rubbish and cast-off equipments of the Queen's soldiers and servants. The adjacent portion of the castle had long ago fallen into disuse and the queer structure that stood in the court opposite the face of a frowning bastion was a relic of the time of King Henry the Eighth. 'Twas a heavy post with a cross-piece at the height of a man's shoulders, and 'twas here that Bluff King Hal witnessed the punishment of many of his offending varlets and mayhap of some of his inoffensive wives, though history does not enlighten us on that score. Elizabeth was of more tender heart than her royal father, and frowned down the use of the whipping-post except on rare occasions when the extremity of the offense warranted the lash.

Several years had elapsed since a culprit had been flogged in the courtyard, and as Her Majesty loathed the sight of the cruel instrument of torture, spreading its arms as if in mockery of the cross whose form it bore, the corner had been walled in, though a door, which was never locked, had been fixed in the wall. A general superstition pervaded the castle that the ghosts of many of King Henry's

victims haunted this scene of their punishment, and in consequence the place was seldom visited except in broad daylight when the servants came at weekly intervals to dispose of the sweepings and the refuse of the kitchen.

The palace was cloaked in silence, and the royal suite, in consequence of their attendance at the Queen's festival the night before, were deep in slumber and high noon was more than likely to find them in their downy beds.

Suddenly two guardsmen appeared around an angle of the wall and made for the door of the deserted court. They dragged between them a limp and pitiful figure who was cringing and moaning in vain appeals for mercy. Directly behind them followed the Lord Chancellor. His noble figure had somewhat lost its grace, and the dark rings that encircled his heavy eyes indicated that he had passed a sleepless night. In one hand he bore a heavy whip whose knotted cords of many cruel strands formed a fiendish implement of torture.

The party entered the door in the wall and Sir Thomas turned and closed it after him. Then at his orders the guardsmen tore off the victim's jerkin, and baring his shoulders, lashed his arms to the cross-piece of the post. When he had been securely fastened the Chancellor ordered them to stand apart that he might speak privately with the trembling wretch. The soldiers withdrew behind the bastion, and the jester, for the man at the post was none other than the poor fool, whimpered afresh and renewed his plea for mercy.

My Lord Hatton laughed harshly at his cries.

"Kyd," said he, "didst ever know me to brook a failure or to fail to reward success? You made a most pitiful mess of our plans last night, and have caused me to walk the floor in an agony of sleeplessness these many hours. You'll suffer dearly for your bungling."

"Master, master," begged the fool, "I've served you faithfully; I've spied out the secrets of the court and carried them to your eager ears, and in this matter of the Spaniard 'twas all arranged without a hitch. I met him in the scullery and gave him the hundred pounds, and 'tis not my fault that Providence interfered and that he was prevented from carrying out the plot."

"Nevertheless, 'twill not prevent your being soundly whipped. I would have flogged you at any rate for the failure, but now I am convinced that 'twas through your babbling tongue that the conspiracy was discovered."

"Why, master, 'twas well arranged, and I swear I oped my mouth to no one. The awful fish seized Fernando, as all on board the barge bore witness, and surely you do not hold me accountable for that."

"This fable of the fish is well enough for courtiers and fools. Had not the eyes of the royal train been magnified by terror they might have seen that 'twas but a mock monster. 'Tis but an hour since that a sweating horseman sought me privately in my apartment, and ere the sun was up gave me a message from Abraham, the Jew costumer, in which he related the sale of just such a green fish's head in the form of a mask late last night to an unknown

soldier of Raleigh's guard. The news of the terrible occurrence has spread even through London, and he sought to curry favour by his revelation. 'Tis lucky that he came to me. I despatched an answer enjoining his further silence under penalty of death, for 'twould never do for me to take any step toward the solution of the matter. 'Twould serve to incriminate me, and I must now be constantly on my guard against the unknown sharer of our secret."

"Master, I have been as silent as the grave. If any one betrayed the plot 'twas the Spaniard himself."

"Nay. I am sure he held communion with none. I might even have spared you had it not been for the rendition of your silly verse on the barge last night. Why, it conveyed a subtle meaning to the Queen, and for the first time in her life I am sure she looked at me with a flicker of suspicion in her eyes. What devil out of hell entered your head and caused you to sing your croaking tune at such a time?"

"My Lord, 'twas only your guilty conscience that accused you. 'Twas no warning that I meant. I was elated at the success of our plans and at thought of my reward, and the words formed themselves unmeaningly in my brain. There was a lull before the rise of the curtain and in my eagerness to amuse the Queen they popped out of my mouth with never a thought of harm until I caught sight of your forbidding frown. Had you been innocent of evil intent you would never have noticed them."

"What!" hoarsely roared the Chancellor, "do you dare to mock me to my very teeth? I'll flog you

within an inch of your life for this"; and he called to the soldiers to approach.

"You'll rue the day, my Lord!" loudly screamed the fool. "I'll publish your treachery throughout the castle and expose your plot to the Queen herself."

Sir Thomas laughed.

"I think not," said he. "Your long legs will never move you from this narrow court, for what life is not flogged out of you will be scorched out of you by the sun's rays or drowned out of you by the evening's damps, for you'll hang on this pretty pole a week or more ere some scullion of the kitchen happens on your rotting carcass. The Queen will wonder what has become of her merry fool, but the Lord Chancellor will produce another and one more faithful to his generous master."

The jester screamed in his terror, but the hardened nobleman handed the lash to one of the guardsmen who had answered his call, and ordered him to lay it on his victim's shoulders with all the force of his athletic arm.

As the cruel blows cut the fool's flesh and the blood spurted from his wounds and covered his poor back, his master stood with a hard smile upon his lips, and when the soldier's efforts began to flag he directed his comrade to continue with the flogging.

Kyd howled lustily at first and writhed in the agony of his pain, but as the whip continued to fall he ceased his crying and began to mutter prayers to his Maker to receive his soul and to punish his tormentor. He fully believed that he had met his doom and prayed that he might die under the lash

rather than be subjected to the torture of the long hours that would attend his slow death of torment and starvation if left alone on the post.

At last the merciful relief of unconsciousness came to him and his limbs collapsed and his head dropped on his shoulder as his senses left him.

Hatton kept his men at their task until their blows had lost their force. Then he commanded their silence under penalty of losing their heads, and telling them to see that the fool was tightly bound to the post, he left them in the court and made his way back to the inhabited portion of the castle.

When he had gone, the soldiers, who still had some traces of feeling, but who had long been tools of the Chancellor and feared him more than the Devil himself, looked at the poor fool's bleeding back in pity.

"He's almost gone," said one. "'Tis a great shame, for he was a comical wight and caused many a laugh with his huge ears and his merry jests."

"'Tis so," answered his companion. "I wish we dared to cut him down. He might have a spark of life left in him, enough to carry him out of the courtyard and to some safe hiding-place. But 'tis as much as our lives are worth, poor devil."

"By Gad, do you but loosen one of his arms and I'll undo the other, and we'll let him drop upon the ground. No doubt he'll die there, and at any rate Sir Thomas will not hold us under suspicion. We've done his dirty work too many times before, and we did but now lay on so lustily that he thought we much enjoyed it."

" 'Tis a chance for the fool and I'll do it; but we must stoutly maintain that we left him neatly triced to the post, if we are questioned."

With trembling hands they nervously unloosed the jester's bonds, letting him slip downward to the floor of the yard, where he lay motionless upon his face. One of them seized the whip and made his way out of the court, while the other followed and closed the door after him. They hastened guiltily away, while the rays of the ascending sun baked the blood on the back of the unconscious fool.

Some two hours after the scourging of the jester Robert Devereux and Will Shakespeare were walking in the castle yard attended by Roger Covert, who kept at a respectful distance in the rear.

"Are you in a mood for exploration this morning, Will?" asked Essex. "In all the months of your sojourn in the Queen's household you have scarce poked your nose out of doors save for a brief stroll on the terrace. I tell you, man, you must take the air more frequently. You have become so feverishly engrossed in the construction of your wonderful plays that your health suffers in consequence. Your pale face and hollow eyes denote a scant acquaintance with that mighty doctor of the human race, the glorious sun.

"In sooth, you must join Southampton and myself in a pilgrimage to the Mermaid Inn. 'Twill do you good and furnish an agreeable change of occupation for your weary brain. In discussion with the famous wits who gather there we will somewhat lighten the tedium of your drudgery at the comedies.

"The performance last night was a great success, but the final act was sadly marred by the fate of the Spaniard. 'Tis a lucky escape for you, Will. He was between your station and the fish or you might have met an awful death. You should inscribe a tablet of gratitude to his memory."

Shakespeare smiled and changed the subject.

"You spoke of an exploring expedition. What points of interest are there near that I have failed to visit?"

"Why, let me see. There is Wolsey's 'tomb-house,' though 'tis like many another gloomy vault; and then there is the famous whipping-post of King Henry."

"Does the barbarous relic still exist? 'Twould interest me much. I'll weave an incident of its cruel reign in some future play."

"I've seen it once, Will, but its exact direction escapes me now. 'Tis in a distant angle of the court. Covert," he said, turning to the guardsman, "know you the location of the whipping-post?"

"Full well, my Lord," answered Roger. I'll guide you thither, though 'tis an unclean spot, reeking with the odors of much filth and garbage."

"Lead the way. We'll 'suage the insult to our nostrils with baths of scented water on our return to the castle."

They followed the soldier through the devious windings of the numerous small courts till at last they came to the door in the wall. As Roger laid his hand upon the rusty knob a hollow groan issued from the interior, and the guardsman fell back a-tremble with fear.

"Lead on, Covert," commanded the dauntless Essex. "What need have three live men to be afraid of one poor ghost? And spirits do not seek the light—'tis some poor wounded animal has crawled in there to die."

Thus reassured, Roger threw the door wide open, and they stood in stupefied astonishment at the sight that met their eyes.

They saw the body of a man lying on his face beneath the ancient post, his bared back crossed with raw and bleeding stripes, his head twisted on his shoulder, to all appearances dead, though the groan that had welcomed them to the court indicated that a spark of life remained.

Roger, his fears dissipated at the sight of a human being's plight, ran forward and turned him on his back.

"Why, 'tis the Queen's fool!" he exclaimed.

Essex and Shakespeare bent over the jester and the poet turned faint as he saw the ghastly features of the unconscious man. His wits acted quickly, however, and he was the first to break the silence.

"Roger," he commanded, "run straightway to the scullery and demand a flask of rum. Plead any cause save the true one. There is some villainy afoot and we must proceed with caution."

Roger sped away as fast as his legs could carry him, while Essex and Shakespeare seized each a hand of the fool, gently chafing them and watching his face for a sign of returning consciousness. In a few moments Covert returned with the rum, saying: "I told them Master Shakespeare had wrenched his

ankle, and his name was indeed an 'open Sesame' to the liquor vault, though it was hard to 'scape their solicitous questionings."

He forced open the jester's mouth and poured an enormous draught of the fiery liquid down his throat. A shudder ran through the senseless form, and Pulsifer's eye-lids slowly opened and he stared at his good ministrants in feeble wonder.

"How came you here, Kyd?" questioned Essex. "What dastardly trick has brought you to this pitiable state?"

The fool shook his head and moaned faintly. Shakespeare leaned over the poor wretch, and placing his arm under his shoulders, raised him to a sitting posture, and taking the flask from Covert held it to his grateful mouth, all unmindful of the blood and grime that stained his own apparel.

As the reviving liquid coursed through his veins Hatton's victim looked with amazement on the gentle features of his rescuer.

At last he whispered, though his voice was not audible to Essex's ears:

"And I would have had you killed last night! You do punish me most fittingly for my treachery."

"Hush, my poor fellow," said Will, "we'll not think of that now. Let it suffice that I was forewarned and escaped. But we must get you away from here and summon the chirurgeon to attend you."

"Nay, nay, 'twould be my death," said the fool in louder tone. "What faint hope of life is left me lies in the security of some private hiding-place. But waste not your time on me, kind masters.

'Twere better that you let me die. 'Twould spare a noble lord much pains. I will no doubt be sought out, no matter where you take me, and my discovery will result in my speedy execution."

"Nonsense, man," protested Essex, "you'll find we're made of sterner stuff. Covert, have not your adventures in the court acquainted you with some safe retreat where we may bear this poor sick varlet and nurse him back to health?"

Roger studied deeply for a moment, then snapped his fingers and uttered an ejaculation of delight.

"The laundry is the very place. 'Tis separate from the rest of the court and 'tis piled high and hung thickly with soft linens. And besides, the laundress is my lady-love. We'll bear him thence, and will she or nill she, Anne Holcombe we'll compel to take him in and give him shelter. We'll curtain off a space with queenly sheets and on a soft couch of sweet-smelling clothes, fresh from her steaming tubs, we'll lay our jester and 'twill be my duty to attend him every day. 'Twill be the last place they will think to search, for none but the maids of the royal household visit the laundry with the soiled linen. And e'en my trips to the domicil of my love are taken under cover of darkness or only after I have made certain that no prying eyes are fastened on my stealthy movements."

"'Tis a clever thought, Roger," said Essex. "Your laundress will be rewarded well, and your master's rise at court may profit much by this visit to the whipping-post."

They wrapped the jester's jerkin round his bleeding shoulders, and pulling some rotting boards from out a heap of rubbish in the yard, they formed a rude litter, and soon the noble Earl, the gentle poet, and the humble serving-man bent their backs in common cause, and skirting an obscure portion of the wall, bore the fool's limp form through the deserted court-yard to the laundry, where Roger went inside to explain their plan to his mistress.

CHAPTER XII

A STRANGER AT COURT

Robert Devereux and Will Shakespeare lounged in the poet's study and filled the apartment with the heavy fumes of Virginia tobacco. When the atmosphere had become so dense that they could with difficulty distinguish each other's forms, Will arose and threw open a window, saying:

" 'Tis strange, Robert, the hold that this fashion of smoking takes upon a man. Why, there's not a courtier in the Queen's suite but does puff vigorously at his long pipe; and they say that even Her Majesty demanded a pull at the hot bowl of Raleigh's favorite clay tube, and was made pitifully sick in consequence."

Essex laughed heartily.

"Elizabeth has many manly qualities," he said, "but she will be content to let the sterner sex monopolize this latest pastime, and no doubt does thank the stars that she is a woman. In truth, the weed made me ill when first I tried to suck its soothing vapor, but now 'tis like a heavenly balm to my nerves. Walter Raleigh conferred a great blessing on the people of England when he brought over the dried bales of the fragrant weed."

"It does also much pacify the stomach after a heavy meal," said Shakespeare, "and frequently at the close of a long day of laborious writing I throw aside my parchment and take up my pipe, finding rest and repose in its curling fumes, and through my half-closed eyes seeing in its filmy smoke-clouds many strange visions which I store in the vaults of my memory for future use in the production of my plays."

"You will be a mighty man, friend Shakespeare; you have attained wonderful success for one so young. The Queen holds you in high favour and is ever ready to enter into a delighted discussion of your latest comedy. Ah, you are a lucky dog. Half the women at court are in love with you, but you are so entirely wrapped up in your dream-life that you fail to see it. I pray God, Will, that some one of them does not turn your head and spoil a brilliant career."

"You need have no fear, Essex. The one woman in all the world to whom I could consign my heart is far beyond my reach, and would laugh at me were I but bold enough to offer her my suit."

"Do not be so sure, Will. A sturdy attack will sometimes batter down the citadel of the hardest heart, and oftentimes a persistent arm is so stretched in the reaching that at last it grasps the highest plum upon the tree of love. Overcome your modesty and strike boldly for your maid."

"Nay, nay, Robert, her heart is in another's keeping, though I am sure he ill deserves it. At times I had some slight hope, but in my sober thoughts I realize that I must be forever wedded to my books."

He placed his pipe upon the window ledge and looked sadly out upon the court-yard, while Essex puffed away in his corner and mused upon the events of the preceding week. Suddenly a thought struck him and he broke the silence with an eager question.

"Will, what news have you of the fool?" he asked. "'Tis three days now since we found him in the deserted court, and I have had no word as to his welfare."

"He hovers between life and death, Robert. Roger informs me that he has lain in a state of stupefaction ever since we carried him into the laundry. He and his maid have bound the poor fellow's wounds with soft bandages and attend him hourly, and I fear that Covert sits up with him through the night, though it is not necessary, for the jester lies like a log upon his pallet, and they rouse him only to give him nourishment, which he takes unknowingly and sinks again to sleep."

"Is there any attempt to discover his hiding-place?"

"None that we know. Evidently his persecutor rests secure in the belief that Pulsifer's dead body lies withering 'neath the post."

"He may have a rude awakening, Will, if once the fool gains power of speech. My blood boils at the cruel treatment of this inoffensive knave, and I will use my influence with the Queen to punish the wretch who thus misused him, if we can learn his name."

Will made no reply and their conversation drifted to other subjects. As the twilight fell upon the

court-yard Shakespeare spied a slender figure hurrying through the gathering gloom and making directly for his apartment. He jumped up, crying to Essex: "Why, 'tis Henry Wriothesley, and coming hither at full speed"; and he ran to the door eagerly to welcome the young Earl.

Southampton burst into the room, and his friends caught the infection of his boyish spirits. He greeted them warmly, and spying Shakespeare's pipe on the window-ledge he ran and picked it up; and dropping in a chair stretched out his legs and puffed vigorously until he had restored bright life to the dying embers, giving vent to his feelings in muttered ejaculations of satisfaction and delight.

"O Will, you have saved my life," he said presently. "My mouth so watered for the taste of smoke that I was nearly frantic. But I came on greater business." He pulled a folded sheet of scented paper from his bosom. "A messenger from London handed me a letter from the maiden, Juliet Florio, in which she tells me that she is coming hither to take up her residence at court with her father, who is to turn his school over to his head instructor. He is to be stationed permanently in the Queen's household as director of Will Shakespeare's plays."

"Good!" chorused his auditors.

"The day after to-morrow will witness the arrival of Juliet, and she may rest assured that I will be at hand to attend her and to protect her from the advances of the Queen's impudent courtiers."

His companions laughed heartily.

"You forget that she has a father," said Shakespeare. "'Tis possible that he may have some slight intention as to the disposition of his daughter."

Wriothesley's face fell, and he sat by the window an inarticulate picture of woe.

"Come, come; brace up, Henry," laughed Essex. "'Tis a little thing to give a man the vapours. Why, you will drive us to the conclusion that you are in love with the maid"; and he winked slyly at Shakespeare.

"That I am, Robert," answered the dejected Earl, "and I care not if the whole world knows it. I am suffocated and submerged by the billows of my affection. I am fathoms deep in the sea of my love, and I will never struggle out of its surging tide as long as there is a breath left in my body to proclaim that she is the goddess at whose shrine I worship. Though I am counted noble in the eyes of a sordid court she far outranks me in the nobility of her gentle soul. If ever the light of faith and purity shone from the eyes of a timid virgin, her bright eyes do dissipate the darkness and the evil of the world. Have you been so blind that you failed to fathom my feeling for our master's daughter?"

"Nay, Henry," said Essex, "you wore your heart on your sleeve at the school, and no one save her doting father was in ignorance of your affection."

"Is it true, Will?" asked the astonished youth, turning to Shakespeare.

"Aye," answered the poet. "But if I needed further proof, 'twas furnished me the eve of our departure for court, when I took a final stroll in

Florio's moonlit garden, and was the unintentional witness of a tender scene at the vine-clad balcony."

Southampton's face grew rosy red as he realized that the secret of his heart had been laid bare to his friend. He was too embarrassed to reply for a moment, but seeing the friendly look of sympathy in the poet's eyes he soon addressed him.

"Surely you do not hold it to my discredit, Will. It is as sacred to me as my hope of future salvation, and is engraven in my memory as the happiest moment of my life."

"Nay, nay, Henry. Essex and I did but tease you. I would have given worlds to have stolen away that night. I felt like an evil interloper encroaching upon forbidden ground, but I dared not move for fear some crackling twig might betray my presence and interrupt your plea of love. I have never before mentioned it, not even to Robert, and you may rest assured I love you all the more for your manly wooing of your lovely maid. Here is my hand, Wriothesley. Essex and I will stand by you ever, in good fortune or in bad. If you will but confide in us we'll help you to wed your love, even if we have to take her away from our dear old tutor by force; and in open defiance of the Queen, carry the pair of you to some obliging minister who will overlook your rank and join your willing hands."

He stepped forward and placed his hand caressingly 'round his friend's shoulder. The tears came to Southampton's eyes, and Essex, to cover his own weakness, jumped up, and slapping Henry on the shoulder said heartily:

"Come, Will, let us drink a cup to Wriothesley's future happiness."

Shakespeare produced glasses and a sparkling decanter of rare old Madeira. He filled for his friends, and in answer to Essex's request of "A toast, Will," he threw his leg upon the table and raised his glass on high, as he leaned toward Southampton, his love for the noble youth shining in his eyes:

"Here's to the wife of thy bosom
Who shares her life with thee;
Here's to the happy children
Who will cluster round thy knee;
Here's to our age-long friendship,
Good comrades till we die;
And here's to your beloved self
Forever and for aye."

"Amen to that!" said Essex, as they drained their glasses.

They smoked and talked until late at night, and when at last the Earls arose to take their departure Southampton stopped at the door and said: "Was ever a man so fortunate in his friends? 'Twas your turn this time, but mine may come, and you may count on me to the death, my comrades of 'The Mailed Hand.'"

The three companions joined Master Florio in welcoming his daughter to the palace, and they attended her presentation at court and completely monopolized her company while in the throne-room, much to the wonderment of the Queen's ladies, and to the deep disgust of the courtiers, who pressed 'round her in an endeavor to be presented and who were eager to worship at the shrine of her rare

beauty. They were kept at arm's length, however, by her father's former pupils, and were at no pains to conceal their chagrin. Elizabeth took to her from the first and wanted to attach her to her person, but the girl pleaded to remain with her father for a time and the Queen gave in.

Juliet had been at Windsor for a fortnight, when one morning, as she was sitting in the low window of her father's apartments, she saw the figure of Henry Wriothesley hurrying across the terrace.

He leaned upon the window ledge, and spoke quickly in his excitement:

"Juliet," he said, "I am called away to-morrow on some business of the estate that does attend my coming of age, and I am here to say good-by."

Juliet turned pale.

"Will you be gone long, Henry?" she asked, with a gentle sigh.

"That I cannot say. 'Tis three months ere I attain my majority, and I may be compelled to remain away from your dear presence until that time. I cannot bear to leave you here exposed to the amorous pleadings of these courtly beaus. I fear I'll lose my love."

"You must think me shallow indeed, Henry."

"Nay, Juliet, but 'twill seem an age to me. Darling," he said eagerly, "will you marry me before I go? We must keep it secret from the Queen until I am of age and then we can snap our fingers at her displeasure. What say you, my love?"

"I dare not, Henry. What would my father say?"

"We'll find that out ere the passage of a quarter-hour," he said, and throwing all convention aside he vaulted over the window-sill. Pressing a kiss on Juliet's mildly resisting lips he took the maiden by the hand, saying:

"My love has made me bold. We'll seek your father and learn our fate, though I swear to have thee for my wife despite the opposition of the whole world."

He led his trembling sweetheart to the corridor and across the hall to her father's room, and knocked loudly on the door. In response to John Florio's summons, he entered, still holding Juliet's hand in his tight grasp. Master Florio, who was seated at a desk and was marking some manuscript, looked up at their arrival and a puzzled expression came upon his face as they stood before him with their fingers entwined.

"Master Florio," boldly began the Earl, "I've come to ask the hand of your daughter in honorable marriage. I've loved her long and my heart is eaten out with impatience. I leave the court to-morrow for a time, and I crave your permission to make her my bride this very day."

"Softly, softly," said Florio, an amused light in his gentle eyes; "she is far below your station and you know not but that I have other plans for her marriage with a man of equal rank."

"Oh, father!" protested his daughter.

"Besides, you are not of age, and the Queen is warden of your estate till then, and you must needs have her permission."

"Let it be done secretly, Master Florio, and the very day my bonds are loosed I'll proclaim her my Lady to the world."

Florio leaned back in his chair and calmly surveyed the young Earl.

"Dost love him very much, daughter?" he said at last, turning toward the girl.

"Oh! with my whole heart, father," answered Juliet. "I cannot live without him."

The tutor chuckled heartily, and Southampton knew that his cause was won.

"We do not die of love, Juliet, but young hearts are not to be denied. You are the very pattern of your beautiful mother, when I wooed her in Italy," said Florio, with a sigh. "My daughter's happiness is my soul's greatest desire. Ah, what a pair of young fools you are. I watched your growing love when you were scarcely more than children at the school, and I gloried in it. Did any member of the Queenly suite save Henry Wriothesley come to me with this proposition of a secret marriage, I'd straightway spurn him from my presence; but I know my pupil's honest English heart, and confide to him my treasure, secure in the knowledge that he will return to claim his wife, whom I will hold safely for him until he is his own master in the eyes of the law."

Juliet flew to her father and kissed him fondly, while Henry knelt at his side and grasped his hand, fervently muttering his expressions of gratitude.

"I will aid you still further," continued this indulgent parent, "for I know a discreet churchman

who greatly favours marriage even amongst the clergy, and who will join you gladly, and will take much joy in keeping your secret from the Queen."

"I venture I could call his name," said Wriothesley.

"S-sh! Do not let the folly of youth o'erleap the bounds of caution. Names are dangerous parts of speech to parse within these castle walls."

"I'll heed your warning, sir; but truly I do wish it could be arranged to have my bride accompany me. 'Twill seem an eternity ere my return."

"'Tis ever the way with lovers. Not content with the moon, you do sigh for the sun. Juliet, what say you? Are you not surprised and more than satisfied at the happy termination of your visit to your father's study?"

"I—I think I do sigh for the sun, too, father," said the sweet maiden, as Florio arose, and taking a hand of each of the children led them happily from the room.

Late the same afternoon Will Shakespeare sat idly on the terrace in the shade of a clump of holly trees that formed an evergreen half-circle at the border of one of the Queen's walks. He was thinking of Southampton and his impetuous love for the fair Juliet, when he heard steps on the walk and the living subjects of his day-dream stepped round the trees and stood before him. He arose quickly to greet them as Southampton spoke:

"We've been looking for you everywhere, Will; I wanted to command Mistress Wriothesley to your keeping."

"Are you married, Henry?" gasped Shakespeare. Then, collecting his startled senses, he doffed his cap and made a sweeping courtesy to the beautiful girl, offering his heartfelt congratulations to the happy pair.

"Yes. My Lord Bishop Kitchen wedded us at noon at Master Florio's request, and will keep our secret until my estate is released. During my absence I will look to you and Essex to entertain my bride. She is a stranger in a wicked court and there are none save you two and her father who are fit to touch her hand. I will even leave her with you now for a short space of time while I seek my apartments and make some final preparations for my journey, that I may spend this last evening in the company of my love." He bowed low, then turned and walked swiftly across the court.

Shakespeare and Juliet seated themselves upon the bench and he told her of his delight in their marriage; of his love for Southampton; of their first meeting, when Henry gave him supper at the inn; of their happy days at the old school in London; but with gentle tact he forbore all reference to his eavesdropping and his vision of their first declaration of love. She laughingly told him of Henry's boldness in the morning, and of her own trepidation; of the love that her good father bore for them; and of the eagerness of Kitchen to marry them, so disappointed was he in his attempts to force the Queen to sanction his own marriage that it was balm to his soul when he could exercise his ministerial power and marry others 'against her will.

They laughed and chatted merrily, and failed to note the light footfall of one of the Queen's ladies who passed along the walk. She reached the clump of trees and stopped suddenly as she heard their happy voices. These words were born upon her listening ears :

"Ah, Master Shakespeare, 'tis strange you have not wed ere this. There's many a lady of the court would deem herself fortunate to become your bride. And you were not in love even when we were at the school?"

"Nay, I swear to you, Juliet, I knew not the meaning of the word love until I entered here."

There was a rustle of skirts, and Lady Anne Hathaway appeared around the trees and approached their bench.

Will Shakespeare arose, and raising his cap was about to present her to his fair companion; but she opened wide her eyes and looked him through and through with never a sign of recognition. Then she elevated her chin and her lips curled with an expression of supercilious scorn as she turned her back upon the bewildered pair and swept proudly down the walk toward the castle.

CHAPTER XIII

THE JESTER'S REVENGE

Pulsifer Kyd lay on an enormous pile of unwashed linen in a little curtained recess at one corner of Anne Holcombe's laundry. The hangings were sheets so cleverly arranged as to give them the appearance of having been hung there to dry, and the innumerable articles of bed-clothing and wearing apparel that hung on the lines between his refuge and the door served almost to conceal the corner from the view of a chance visitor.

In the hollow cheeks and attenuated form and the gaunt head that appeared so ghastly against the background of the white pillow it would have been hard indeed to recognize the person of the capering fool who had so often amused the Queen and court by his flashes of wit. The first few days of stupefaction had been followed by an attack of fever, and it was due alone to the unceasing vigilance and patient nursing of Roger Covert and his laundress that the breath of life still remained in this emaciated wreck of a man. He had become able to take a few drops of nourishment at long intervals, and it was due to their administration that a little strength was coming back to him and that his power of speech was now somewhat restored. The guardsman sat

on an inverted tub by his resting-place and with one arm supported his head while with the other hand he fed him a few spoonfuls of a stimulating broth.

"There now, Pulsifer," said he, "Anne's soup will warm the cockles of your heart, and we'll make a new man of you. We'll put the flesh back upon your bones—that is, all that was not stripped off your back by your cruel master's whip—and we'll prepare to laugh again and oft at your merry sallies before the Queen."

The fool looked at him with his staring eyes.

"Do you think, Master Covert, that there is some slight chance for me to live?" he asked.

"Zounds, man!" answered Roger, "there's not a doubt of it. 'Twould take more than a beating to crush the vital spark in your droll and toughened carcass."

"Nay, I misdoubt it much," said Kyd. "The spirit within me is broken and I care not whether I live or die. I served my Lord faithfully, even though 'twas in an evil cause, and witness his reward. While you and your good master, against whose life I plotted, do raise me up and succour me in my affliction. I cannot understand it. 'Twould have been more seemly had you left me there to die."

"Nay, Pulsifer. You were but a tool and did as you were bid. You owed your existence at the court to him and were thus completely in his power. And indirectly you did save Will Shakespeare's life, for I overheard your conversation with Fernando

upon the royal barge and warned my master forth-with of your conspiracy."

A light came into the jester's eyes and a faint color mounted his cheeks.

"Then you were the soldier who bought the fish from the Jew?" he asked eagerly.

"Aye," answered Roger, "the very same."

"I see it all now," murmured the fool. "I laid the intervention in the poet's favor to supernatural hands; but your explanation makes all clear and much relieves my tired brain. But whether I am to live or die I would make reparation for the wrong I've done a noble man, and I pray the breath of life may remain within my lungs until it is accomplished."

"You had best think only of getting well, Kyd. Sir Thomas is unlikely to make another attempt upon my master's life, especially since he knows you are at large. I've heard it whispered by my comrades of the guard that he is searching everywhere for you and has spread a tale amongst the courtiers that you purloined his purse and disappeared in consequence. The Queen laughs at him, saying that it is a good joke, and that you were less of a fool than she thought. She even twitted him with your warning on the barge, at which his brow grew black and he was in a pestilent humour for the rest of the day."

The jester smiled faintly.

"'Tis unlikely that he will find me in this snug retreat," he said. "But tell me, Master Covert, does he still seek the hand of the Queen's beautiful maid of honor?"

"You mean the Lady Anne Hathaway. Why, he flutters 'round the flame of her bright eyes like the deluded moth scorching his wings on a flickering taper. For a time his suit seemed cold, and the maiden would have none of him; but she has turned again, chameleon-like, and eagerly welcomes his approach. They spend long hours together on the terrace and ride and walk often in company, which pleases the Queen o'er much, as she has long desired to mate the Chancellor and her haughty maid. Meanwhile, my master, Will Shakespeare, of whom I know not what to make, has plunged deep into the writing of his books and seldom takes the air, and when I catch sight of his glum face it makes me sad, for he was ever a merry youth and withal a kind master and of a gentle nature as you well know. I would that I could cheer him up, though my efforts would count for naught when those of Robert Devereux and the beautiful Italian damsel prove unavailing."

"Think you that Anne Hathaway loves the Chancellor?"

"That I cannot say, Pulsifer, though I am sure that Will Shakespeare loves her."

"Then we can place a stumbling-block in Hatton's path. Do you go to her, Covert, and inform her of his treachery. 'Twill clear the way for the poet."

"Nay," said Roger, shaking his head sadly, "my master swore me to secrecy. I proposed it myself the night of the festival, but he would not hear to it, and I dare not break my oath."

"O if this sick body of mine were of the inclination of my brain," groaned the jester, "I would seek the maid myself. There is no seal upon my lips, and it might result in the happiness of two young lives and the downfall of a tremendous villain."

"Stay," said Covert. "Though I am pledged to my master I will countenance the sending of a message to Mistress Hathaway; or better still, Pulsifer, if we could only entice her here and let her see for herself your pitiable state and your raw wounds, your tale would indeed have much effect. I'll send Anne Holcombe to you, that you may contrive some plan to bring the proud beauty to your side, and I will close my ears and thus observe the letter of my master's faith."

He arose and was about to raise the sheet, when he heard pattering steps, and the laundress darted excitedly into their retreat.

"O Roger," she cried, "two guardsmen are speeding across the castle yard and head directly for my door. What shall we do? What shall we do? The poor jester will be discovered."

Covert said not a word, but raised Pulsifer's gaunt frame in his strong arms and told Anne Holcombe to move aside the heap of linen. When she had done so he laid the fool gently upon the bare floor, and they covered him with the clothing until but a few pieces remained unused. Then Roger lay carefully down upon the pile, saying:

"Cover me over lightly, Anne, and strenuously plead your innocence when they approach. Use

every endeavour to keep them away from the screen and I am much mistaken if they do not take the bait."

Anne placed the remaining garments over the guardsman, and then ran to the door just as two burly soldiers stamped into the room.

"My pretty laundress," said one, impudently chucking her under the chin, "we've come to search your castle. 'Tis the last resort, for every other nook and cranny of the court has been explored. If you have been harboring the court fool, you had better give him up or you may lose your laundry."

Anne dropped on her knees and wept bitterly as she loudly proclaimed her innocence.

"Come now, stop your blubbering," said the second guardsman, "we are not harming women. We want only the jester." He strode to the tubs and poked the drying clothes, and suddenly espied the drapery in the corner. "Oho," said he, "the trail grows hot!" and he made for the retreat. The laundress ran to him and seized him around the knees, tearing at his clothing in her efforts to restrain his steps. He pushed her off with a curse and tore the hanging sheet aside, giving a laugh of triumph as he saw the great heap of linen.

"I think we've found his lair," he said, and his companion ran to his assistance, and together they threw the soiled garments off the top of the pile. In a moment they gave an exclamation of delight as a heavy boot was exposed to view. They tore furiously at the clothing, and soon uncovered the

figure of a man, which sat up, disclosing to their astonished view the features of their brother-guardsman, Roger Covert.

"Curse you!" said that worthy, in a violent temper; "cannot a man steal a few moments when off duty to visit his lady love without the interference of a couple of prying varlets, who compel him to hide in this foul linen that he might save the maiden's reputation from their prattling tongues? I tell you it is a sneaking trick to play upon your comrade, and 'tis not soldierly to come with your bellowing tale of a disappearing jester."

"Roger, Roger, we meant no harm!" cried the first guardsman. "By my faith, if we had known you were here we never would have meddled. I hope you will not hold it against us. We sought the fool, who has stolen Hatton's purse and has vanished several weeks since, as you must know."

Roger seemed to become gradually appeased by their protestations, and they solemnly gave him their pledges of secrecy, which he was certain they would keep, for they knew him of old and feared to anger him.

"Faith, you live up to your old name of Roger 'Under Cover,'" said the second guardsman, as they took their departure.

When they had disappeared in the court-yard, Anne and Roger hastily removed the garments from the poor jester and rearranged his couch and made him comfortable once more.

"'Twas a narrow escape," said Covert. "You are well-nigh smothered, Pulsifer; but you are in a

fine sweat, which will be a God-send for the fever, and we need have no more fear of searchers in this quarter. My comrades will report that the laundry is above suspicion. And now I will leave Anne with you, that you may enter into your compact concerning Mistress Hathaway."

He went to the door and stood overlooking the castle yard and smiling to himself at thought of the soldiers' discomfiture.

An hour later the laundress knocked timidly at the door of Anne Hathaway's apartment, which was opened by the maiden herself.

"Why, who sent you here?" she asked in astonishment. "Your duties lie in the servants' quarters."

"My Lady, I am the bearer of a message from Pulsifer Kyd, the jester. He lies in hiding in my laundry, and is sick nigh unto death."

"What has the fool to do with me. I will report the thief's whereabouts to the Queen."

"Nay, my Lady, he is no thief, but a sadly misused wretch, who has an important disclosure to make to you concerning his master, Sir Thomas Hatton."

Anne flushed, but listened with more attention for the messenger's reply to her question:

"Of what consequence is Sir Thomas Hatton to me, I pray you?"

"That I know not, but I do know that he had the jester beaten severely and left him to die, which he would have done most promptly had not Master Shakespeare intervened and saved his life."

"I am of a mind to listen to his tale," said Anne Hathaway, "if you will take me to him."

"He eagerly awaits you, my Lady," answered the laundress, as Anne retired to her room for a moment. She returned with a light shawl, and the maidens swiftly threaded the corridors and stole unobserved across the castle yard to Anne Holcombe's domain.

The girl took the Queen's lady behind the screen and left her alone by the bedside of the jester, returning to her long-neglected tubs.

Anne Hathaway was horrified at the emaciation of the poor fool, and a wave of pity surged over her while the tears came into her eyes.

Pulsifer's quick eyes noted her emotion.

"Do not weep, my Lady," he said. "I deserve your condemnation, not your tears. I am little better than an assassin, for I plotted to kill, and it is not my fault that the poet Shakespeare does not lie at the bottom of the Thames in place of that yellow Spaniard, Fernando Cordes."

Anne clutched her heart in her excitement at his revelation.

"'Tis no wonder that Sir Thomas Hatton had you flogged. Had I been Lord Chancellor your carcass would have swung from the castle wall for your conspiracy. But why do you make this evil confession to me? I have no interest in William Shakespeare."

Pulsifer looked blankly at the maid for a moment, then his weak throat gave vent to a hoarse laugh.

"Why, 'twas the Chancellor himself that planned the murder and I was but his tool," he said; "and for the failure of Fernando to despatch his victim, I being the only dupe at hand, was made to suffer, and as I threatened to expose him to the Queen his lips pronounced the death sentence upon me, and 'twas not his fault that I survived.

"Though you have no interest in the playwright you have much in Sir Thomas Hatton, and it is an act of mercy to warn you in time. See," he said, as with the strength of despair he sat up on the couch and tore the shirt and bandages from his back. "Let no false feelings of modesty cast down your eyes, but look upon these cruel stripes, the ghastly souvenirs of his vengeful hate."

"My God! Can this be true?" shuddered the girl, as she sank aghast upon the upturned tub.

"Alas! too true, my Lady. 'Tis said that the Lord Chancellor seeks your hand and favors you much with his loving advances. Think you that a man who is capable of doing murder and of inflicting punishment like mine on the lowest specimen of humankind would make a gentle husband? At that I would not warn you, though my wounds cry for vengeance; but his intended victim was my saviour and I have some inkling that his sighs are cast in your direction."

"Nay, Kyd, you are mistaken. He worships at another shrine. But why should my Lord Hatton seek his life?"

"Because he sought your love, and he imagined that the poet stood in his way. Fernando Cordes

was to stab him on the royal barge. I saw the knife fall before the fish got him; but Master Shakespeare rose smiling and unhurt in the midst of the general confusion, though I am at a loss to understand what turned the dagger's edge, for the aim was true. Some fairy hand must have clutched the assassin's blade."

"The arrival of the monster was a visitation of Providence, Kyd?"

"Nay, 'twas prearranged. I have since learned that his loyal serving-man overheard our plot and garbed himself in this mask of the fish, though all on board the float were fooled by its natural appearance in the dim light of the flickering lanterns."

"Why did he not inform the Queen and have the wretch cast into the Tower? 'Twould have saved him many pains and much danger."

"He did contend with Shakespeare and insisted upon revealing the plot to Her Majesty, but the poet most sternly refused to countenance such action, holding that it would not be the part of honour to bear a tattling tongue."

"And he went to the barge knowing full well that his life would be attempted?"

"Yes, my Lady. He decided to cope with the assassin alone and unarmed, though he was stationed apart from the other courtiers by Hatton's order. He knew nothing of the guardsman's plan, and the wonder is that he still lives."

A queer look came into Anne Hathaway's eyes, and she buried her face in her hands and sat in silence for a long time. The jester, weakened by

the excitement of the interview and the stirring events of the day, lay exhausted on the linen, with half-shut lids and with the beads of perspiration shining on his clammy brow.

At last Anne raised her head and spoke:

"My poor fellow, I am under a heavy obligation to you for my warning," she said. "I think Sir Thomas Hatton will be read a bitter lesson when next we meet; and what is more, Kyd, I will use my personal efforts with the Queen to have you restored to favour as soon as you are well, and I will so arrange that you need have no more fear of the Lord Chancellor."

"I fear that I am on the couch of Death, my Lady," murmured the jester.

"Nay, nay, Kyd. You must keep up your courage. I will send you a chirurgeon and an attendant with medicine and dainties, and we will have you quickly nursed back to health and strength, though you will ever bear the marks of Hatton's malice."

The fool mumbled his grateful thanks, and Anne Hathaway left the laundry, going directly to her rooms, where she threw herself upon a divan and pondered o'er the revelations of Hatton's duplicity.

"Coward! Assassin! Lover!" she said. "And he thought to trick me with his protestations of affection. Even my Queen is befooled by his smiling visage and his insinuating grace. And I, God help me, was on the verge of yielding to his suit and becoming his wife. I was dazzled by the glamour of his high rank and his proud position at court. I could have been one of the first ladies in the land,

but I am spared an awful fate. Oh! the treachery that is cloaked 'neath many a fair exterior. A nobler heart beats in the breast of Shakespeare's humble serving-man than ever stirred the pulses of the wicked Chancellor. There is true faith for you, Anne; the love of this man for his master. He overlooked all thought of danger to himself and risked his life to save his hero.

"The poet showed a courage which I never credited to his gentle nature. Ah, Will Shakespeare, if you were as steadfast in your love as you are in your bravery, Sir Thomas Hatton might have cause for jealousy. But I must despatch a note and demand the return of my garter. You are so enamoured of your Italian doll that I fear the jewel may change owners, and I swear no other woman shall ever wear my precious buckle."

CHAPTER XIV

A LADY AND A LORD

Four men sat in the bed-chamber of the Spanish King and entered eagerly into a discussion of the monarch's plans regarding his marriage.

They were the Duke of Alva; Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma; the Queen of England's Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas Hatton; and the King himself.

Although the hour was close to noon, Philip II had but just arisen and had attired himself in a faded dressing-gown and a pair of dingy woollen slippers, looking anything but the ruling spirit of the proudest Catholic realm in the world as he sat with his long limbs crossed and blinked with bleary eyes at his councillors.

"What success had you with Elizabeth?" asked the King, addressing Hatton.

"Your Majesty, I most ardently plead your cause, but she turned a deaf ear to my argument, saying that she would not forsake her faith even for such a prize as the King of Spain. She intimated that your stay had been much prolonged at court and that 'twould please her mightily when she saw the white sails of your ship speeding down the Thames, and set for home."

Philip gnashed his teeth in his rage.

"Think you that our difference in religion is her true reason, Hatton?" he asked.

"That I cannot say, your Majesty. She is a woman of many minds, but I am prone to believe that her determination is steadfast on one point, her desire to rule alone. I have heard her say to Raleigh, when first you came to England, that in marrying a King she would never be more than Queen; but in her single state she is both King and Queen, her reign unhampered by the wishes of a royal spouse, and free to play at Cupid's game with the many changing nobles, courtiers, and even kings that figure on her checker-board of love."

"She has ever been a fickle monarch," said Alva; "but, as age grows on apace, methinks she'd much prefer to give up the cares of state, and place the reins of power in manly hands."

"Age enters not into her consideration," said Hatton. "She'll be a lover until she dies."

"What part does the Earl of Leicester play in this game of love?" asked the Duke of Parma.

"Upon my faith, I am convinced that you've struck the root of all this opposition. Since Elizabeth first met him years ago, his power at court has not waned, even for an instant. The ever-changing courtiers come and go, but Robert Dudley remains at her left hand and she ever bends a ready ear to his counsels. He never oversteps the bounds of dignity while in the presence of her suite, but 'tis certain that he holds her in some spell; and, though he is

of lowly birth, the heart of the mighty Elizabeth inclines more toward his love than that of the greatest prince of Europe."

"Why the Devil does she not marry the upstart?" snapped the King. "Surely the spoiled creature has her own way in everything else. 'Twould be consistent with many other unqueenly acts."

"Indeed, 'tis a great mystery at court. Surely it must be due alone to the perversity of her nature. Realizing that she may, she will not have him; but if any one should dare to offer opposition to the Earl no doubt she would wed him in much haste and rule him too with a rod of iron."

"She would never rule the King of Spain," muttered Philip, "and the sly minx is too cute to put her head into the trap. I am firmly convinced that we waste our time in her court. She has put me off for many weeks with her elusive answers, but I can see that she is but the echo of Leicester's wish. I give him joy in his conquest. I care not for myself, 'tis the added power that I crave. Upon my soul, Mary Stuart would make a more tender bride. She is a good Catholic, and if I can but compass her release I am certain that she will bestow her hand and also her heart upon me as my reward.

"Why, this petulant Elizabeth did most shortly refuse to grant me even a trifling favour. I demanded the hand of one of her maids for Gomez de Silva, who was infatuated with her beauty, and she curtly advised me to send the minister to plead his own cause, saying that she never interfered in the love affairs of her ladies. 'Tis a great country, where

the wishes of a sovereign go for naught. If we had the maid in sunny Spain we'd soon humble her proud spirit."

"Who was the maiden that Don Gomez desired?" asked Alexander Farnese of the King.

"The handsomest of all her attendants and the haughtiest in her bearing. She is named Anne Hathaway."

The Chancellor's ears pricked up and he straightened his shoulders as he addressed the King:

"I flatter myself, your Majesty, that a kinder fate is in store for Mistress Hathaway. Elizabeth dissembled when she assured you that she never meddled with her maidens' loves. She has long openly countenanced my suit of the lady-in-waiting, and ere the sun sets on another day I am confident that I will hold the plighted troth of the beautiful damsel. She has been all smiles to me of late and most openly welcomes my loving advances. No doubt she had the Queen's ear in advance of your Majesty and told her love for me to her indulgent mistress.

"Poor de Silva. After my interview with my Lady I will offer him my condolence. King Philip, your grandees cannot hope to cope with an English nobleman upon his own soil. Nathelss, he is a dignified gentleman and I hope that his suit may prosper better in another direction."

The King smiled at his conceit, but changed the subject.

"Hatton," he queried, "what know you of the character of Mary Stuart's gaoler, the keeper of the Tower?"

"Sir Amias Paulet is a confiding soul, and very much of a fool, your Majesty. So gentle is his nature that he cannot bear to see even an animal suffer, and his appointment as keeper of the prison was in sooth an act of irony on the part of the Queen. If he had his way, he would open wide the doors and turn the unfortunate inmates out to perpetual freedom."

"It augurs well for the plot to release Mary," mused the King.

"Nay, your Majesty, there you are mistaken; for, despite his kind heart, he is a man of inflexible honesty, and Elizabeth chose him well, for he would cut off his good right arm before he would betray his trust, no matter how his heart might bleed at his poor prisoner's plight."

"Hatton, it is our last recourse, for I am determined not to return bootless to Spain. Can you not think of some plan to free the Queen of Scots, that we might bear her away, to Elizabeth's great dismay."

"It must be done through other means. I have an idea. Norfolk is allowed to visit her frequently and is much in love with her. We might prevail upon him to slay Sir Amias by offer of our aid to secure him his bride; and once she passed the portals of the Tower you could whisk her aboard of your ship and none would be the wiser."

"What of Norfolk?" asked the King.

"In my capacity of Lord Chancellor of the realm, I would order his imprisonment, and would see to it that his lips were sealed until I had obtained the

Queen's signature for his execution. You may rest assured I would lose no time in delivering him to the headsman."

"By my faith," said Philip II, "you should have been a Spaniard. You make a famous conspirator. What say you, Farnese, to the plot?"

The Duke of Parma shook his head.

"Your Majesty," he answered, "Norfolk is too old a bird to be caught with chaff. Unless a suitable guarantee could be given him that his bride would be delivered into his hands he would make no attempt to free her, but would rather carry the news of your overtures to Queen Elizabeth in the hope of currying favour at your expense and advancing his cause by ridding England of your presence."

"You have a serpent's wisdom. Our hands are tied in that direction," grumbled the King.

"Could we not effect her release ourselves, your Highness?" asked Alva. "By bribing the food-bearers from the kitchen, we might guise ourselves in their uncouth apparel, and muffling our faces might gain access to the Queen's cell. The keepers would not dare to raise their hands, when once they discovered your royal presence in the Tower, and we could most easily slay them, and likewise this soft-hearted fool, Sir Amias Paulet. Sir Thomas could so arrange that the way might be clear for our escape."

The King shuddered at thought of exposing his precious body to personal danger.

"Nay, Alva," he said, "I am not fitted for the expedition. We must find some more subtle plan and

free the Scottish Queen by stratagem. Hatton, can you not think of a tool in all the castle who would sell his very soul for a suitable reward?"

"Pulsifer Kyd, the jester, would have been the man for us, your Majesty. He was a privileged character and had access everywhere, but he has disappeared. I am at a loss to think of another who would do."

"Name me over the list of attendants in the suite," testily snapped the King, and sat with a frown, checking them off on his fingers as the Chancellor named the various servants in the castle.

He had finished with the scullery maids and kitchen knaves and at last called the name of Anne Holcombe, the laundress.

"Stop!" said Philip, as his evil eyes lit up with an expression of delight. "I have the key to the solution of our plans. Parma, can you have the ship in readiness to sail for Spain with to-morrow evening's tide?"

"Your Majesty, our sailors have been awaiting your commands this week or more, and it but needs the unfurling of the sails and a steady breeze to speed us swiftly on our way."

"Good, good!" chuckled the monarch. "After all, I have a mind to disguise myself, and we will yet free Mary from her toils, and no one will be harmed.

"Hatton, I desire to break my fast. Will you give orders that I may be served. Attend us this evening in my apartments and we will submit to you our perfected plan."

Hatton bowed low and left the king, who turned to the Admiral, saying:

"Alexander, do you have the decks scoured and the ship put in proper condition for the reception of a royal dame. Whether we fail or not, we will have to leave the shores of England, and that most speedily. If we are unsuccessful, I have one last resource, the German Princess, though her domains are not as broad as I would wish. Alva, unfold me that map of the Netherlands and let us see the width of the Dutch possessions that we might add to the Spanish crown."

The Duke took down the map and spread it out before his King, and the three conspirators were deep in its perusal when the attendants arrived with His Majesty's breakfast.

Meanwhile, Sir Thomas Hatton betook himself to his own rooms and summoned his barber, who shaved him and dressed his hair and bathed him in much scented water. He then garbed himself in an elegant suit of white silken doublet and hose, fastened his satin slippers with enormous buckles of gold, clasped his jerkin with handsome jeweled brooches, and putting on a broad hat with drooping plume that matched his dazzling apparel, he threw a rich cloak about his shoulders and set out in quest of his lady-love.

Anne Hathaway sat on her favourite bench in the Queen's garden and was thinking of the poor jester's sad plight and wondering if he would recover, when suddenly she espied the gorgeous figure of the Chancellor as he entered the court and made his way

across the terrace toward her seat. The lines of her pretty mouth set in rigid determination and she moved to the centre of the bench, spreading her skirts so that there would be no room for Sir Thomas to sit beside her.

The Lord hastened his step at the sight of the maiden, and arriving in front of her station he doffed his hat and with a sweeping bow saluted her.

"Prithee, Mistress Hathaway, I am in great fortune. I did not expect to find you here."

"For whom were you looking, then, Sir Thomas? Methought you gazed anxiously about as you entered the garden," queried the girl, an odd twinkle coming into her eyes, for she was determined to play with this gay deceiver as a cat with a mouse ere she placed him on the rack of his own duplicity.

Hatton's face colored, but he determined upon a bold stroke.

"Well, to be frank, my Lady, I sought you. I will not be tossed on the sea of hope and plunged in the depths of despair any longer, but have come to learn my fate."

Anne suddenly changed the subject.

"Why do you appear in this gorgeous array, my Lord? Do you serve the Queen at some special audience in the throne-room to-day?"

"Nay, I wait upon a lady fairer than Her Majesty. I attend one who is a greater Queen to me, for she is the Queen of my heart."

"See," said Anne, suddenly pointing to the lower terrace; "a couple walk in the castle yard. They have a familiar look."

The Chancellor, in despair, turned his eyes in the direction indicated.

"It is Master Shakespeare and the Italian maiden, Juliet Florio," he said.

"So it is. What think you of the poet? Does he not write beautiful plays?"

"They are passable," said the agonized lover; "but you keep me from my purpose. Why do you so tantalize me with your tricks? You know full well what I would say to you—that my veins are bursting with my love for you; that I am longing to take you in my arms and crush your dear form in my close embrace; and I do here and now most humbly offer you my name and rank, and on my bended knee do ask you to become my wife."

Anne looked coldly at him, as he knelt at her feet, and tapped her foot impatiently upon the gravel walk.

"Do I not mistake your meaning, my Lord?" she said. "Perhaps when you said 'wife' your tongue tripped, for I am certain you meant 'slave.'"

Hatton looked at her in astonishment.

"Nay, I meant 'wife,' my true and honoured wife, Anne."

She pierced him through and through with her accusing eyes as she answered:

"Sir Thomas Hatton, I fear your love would wane, and ere long my white shoulders might bear the cruel marks of your lash, marks similar to—well, we will say to those on the back of Pulsifer Kyd, the court fool."

The Chancellor's face turned livid and his jaw dropped as he arose and tremblingly gasped:

"What do you mean, girl?"

"I mean that you cannot pull the wool over my eyes as you have done over those of Her Majesty and the whole court. Your wickedness has found you out, my Lord, and I thank God that I am spared the fate of becoming your victim. Nay," she said, as a murderous gleam came into his eyes and he looked stealthily around the garden, "you may close my lips, but it will be your undoing, for we are prepared. A half-dozen of us in the castle hold your secret and the first hostile movement on your part will be the signal for your exposure to the Queen."

"How found you this out?" stammered the Lord.

"We have your fool in our keeping."

"The villain lies; he bears me malice."

"Nay, Sir Thomas, we have other proof. Your plot was overheard the day of the Queen's festival, and your murderous attempt upon the poet's life was foiled."

The Chancellor grasped the arm of the bench, and mastering his voice with a mighty effort, made a final appeal to the maiden.

"All's fair in love, Mistress Anne," he said. "I swear to you that I was so drunk with my affection for you that it mattered not who stood in my way. I would have killed the Queen herself and poisoned the whole court, if by so doing I might have brought you to my arms. Let me plead the demon of jealousy as my excuse and beg you to reconsider your decision. In the temple of my love I can atone for

my sin and by my good actions for the rest of my life live down this error of my passion. Besides, you cannot overlook the fact that I am one of the highest nobles in this mighty realm."

"'Tis notorious throughout the court, Master Hatton, that Elizabeth created you Lord Chancellor because your graceful dancing took her fancy one day when she was in a generous mood. 'Twas a strange leap to fame and fortune, but I would have you understand once and for all that when I wed, my husband will be a man and not a jumping-jack."

The Chancellor's face paled at her words, and, realizing that his suit was hopeless, he threatened her in his rage.

"Take care, my Lady," said he. "Despite your mockery, Sir Thomas Hatton is a great power at court. 'Twould be well not to anger him too deeply. You had best put a curb upon your tongue, wench, or you will rue the day that you spurned the offer of my heart and hand."

"My rejection is rendered less bitter by the sight of yon poet billing and cooing with the Italian minx. It must be a sorry vision for your eyes, Mistress Hathaway. However, I assure you that I will be fully revenged."

Anne answered him with a merry peal of laughter.

"My Lord," she said, "your neck will be safe from the executioner's block so long as you adhere to my conditions. But the moment that you fail to keep faith in the slightest particular Her Majesty will be informed, and your head will part company with your shoulders as surely as the bright sun shines upon this lovely terrace."

Hatton stood sullenly on the walk, and his drooping form and dejected air acknowledged his defeat.

"These are my terms," she said: "You will reinstate the jester as soon as he is well, and will publicly proclaim that you had mislaid your purse, and tender him your apology. You will keep a still tongue in your head and will not slander Master Shakespeare or his friends to the Queen or her courtiers; and you will bestow the sum of one hundred pounds out of your own private fortune upon the laundress, Anne Holcombe, for her devoted care and tender nursing of Pulsifer Kyd during a long and wasting fever. In this way, my Lord, you may live to a good old age, and somewhat atone for the wickedness of your past life."

"Your conditions will be fulfilled," he said humbly. "But must I give up the one cherished hope of my existence?"

Anne Hathaway arose with flashing eyes.

"You will leave me, Sir Thomas Hatton, now and forever. And if you dare to address me again, either in public or in private, I will lay my riding-whip, my gauntlet, or even my naked hand, if the conditions so demand, across your cowardly lips and straightway will denounce you to the Queen."

She stamped her foot and pointed toward the castle wall.

"GO!" she commanded.

The Chancellor dropped his eyes and hesitated for a moment, then turned and slunk across the courtyard and passed forever out of the maiden's life.

CHAPTER XV

THE LAUNDRESS AND THE RUFF

Anne Holcombe tiptoed across the floor of her laundry and gently lifted the curtain of the jester's retreat. She bore a steaming bowl of broth and a large spoon with which to administer it, but she stood for a moment in hesitation as she saw that the fool was soundly sleeping. At last she crossed to his couch and shook him gently, but he remained unconscious of her touch. She determined to await his natural awakening, and setting the bowl on the tub by his bed she returned to her work. She was bending over her ironing-table when she heard a stealthy step at the door, and two heavily cloaked figures crossed her threshold.

"This must be the place, Alva," whispered the taller man; and espying the trembling girl he beckoned her to approach as his companion turned and carefully closed the door behind them.

Anne stood motionless in her terror at their mysterious movements, until the tall stranger dropped the cloak with which he was muffling his face and displayed the cruel features of the crafty Spanish King to her astonished vision.

The laundress stepped forward and dropped on her knees at the monarch's feet.

"S-sh!" he said, as he laid his finger on his lips, "are there any prying ears at hand to overhear our speech?"

"Nay, your Majesty," she answered. "But why is the establishment of a poor laundress honoured by this visit?"

"Listen, maid," he said, as he clutched her wrist and raised her to her feet. "If you will serve us faithfully your future is assured. 'Tis in your power to earn five hundred pounds in a short space of time and with little trouble to yourself. What say you?"

"Why, 'tis a fortune," murmured the girl. "I could wed my guardsman and we might live in comfort for the rest of our days. How may I aid your Majesty?"

The King looked cautiously around the room.

"Alva, take your station at the window," he said, "and warn us quickly if an unwelcome visitor does approach." He cast aside his dignity and seated himself upon the ironing-table, bending over and fixing the girl with his piercing eyes as he unfolded his plan.

"We would free the Queen of Scots," he said, "and bear her with us back to Spain. It will be a very simple matter with your aid."

"Why, your Majesty, I fail to see how I can help you. Besides, it would be treachery to my Queen."

"Nonsense, nonsense! Elizabeth desires her to escape as much as we, but does not dare to set her at liberty of her own free will; and think, girl, think of the fortune I will place at your command. And I assure you there will be no risk."

The laundress clutched her throbbing breast.

"What is the plan, your Majesty?" she asked.

"Do you wash the linen of Mary Stuart?" asked the King.

"Yes, your Majesty, all the clothing of the royal household and of the prisoners in the tower is brought to my laundry."

"Hast any pieces of her apparel in your possession at present?"

"Yes, I have just ironed her ruff and intended to deliver it in person to-day."

"Good, good!" chuckled the King. "The fates are with us in this adventure and I feel certain that our success is assured."

"But still I fail to understand how I enter into your plans."

The King laughed happily.

"My girl," he said, "'tis the simplest thing in the world. When the dial in the court-yard indicates the hour of two, do you take up the ruff and pursue your way to Mary's prison. The sleepy gaolers will suspect nothing out of the ordinary in your customary visit. When you have entered the presence of the Queen of Scots, delay your departure under pretense of gathering the soiled linen, and quickly whisper in her ear to effect a change of garments with yourself. Your shawl will conceal her royal features and as she is of your identical build, she may pass safely out of the Tower, bearing her bundle of linen, and will fall into the hands of her waiting friends who will be stationed at your laundry in the guise of guardsmen of Elizabeth. Note

these details carefully, girl, for repetition to the Queen. They will accompany her through the courtyard, and to curious eyes it will simply appear to be a love journey of two gay soldiers and a coquetting maid.

"You will quietly remain in the Tower in her place, and, long ere your discovery, my gallant ship will have breasted the waves of the Thames, and the Scottish Queen and the Spanish King will be speeding on their way to the land of the Righteous Faith and a conjugal throne."

"But, your Majesty, what is to become of me? If I am found in the prison, the Queen will have me beheaded."

"Nay, nay, girl, we have looked out for that, and will better reward a faithful service. You will be discovered by Sir Thomas Hatton, who will read you a severe lecture before the gaoler, but who will privily hand you the purse containing the five hundred pounds, and will dismiss you to your quarters with a reprimand. He is all-powerful with Elizabeth, and she will be compelled to wink at this strategic move of her Catholic brother-in-law, while you will be free to live a life of ease in the arms of your lover."

"What guarantee have I, your Majesty, that I will be set free?"

The King's eyes flashed as he slid clumsily from the table and stood upon the floor before the girl.

"Is not my royal word enough for the empress of the laundry?" he asked angrily. "Think you that Philip II, King of Spain, would seek the dwell-

ing of a humble menial of the English court and take her into his confidence, if he did not intend to carry out his compact. 'Twould profit me not, girl, to have you killed; and besides the Lord Chancellor may have further use for you, if you prove yourself shrewd in this adventure. Here," he said, as he pulled a small purse from his belt and tossed it to the abashed maiden, "is an earnest of my good faith. 'Twill be a considerable addition to the sum already promised. Can we count upon you, wench?"

The laundress curtseyed low.

"Your Majesty," said she, "I will serve you faithfully, and will bear a secret tongue. I am not proof against the argument of the purse, and I believe 'twill be an act of justice if the poor Scottish Queen is removed forever from the shadow of the scaffold, that she may live out her allotted life in a foreign clime."

"You are a discreet maiden," chuckled the King, "and do much to raise my spirits by your entrance into our conspiracy. I wish you happiness with your guardsman. Have you the directions for Mary straight in your brain?"

"I understand them fully," she answered.

The King stepped toward the door.

"Alva," he called, "let us take our departure to the castle, where we may prepare for our flitting this afternoon."

The noble opened the door and stealthily entered the court-yard. Philip followed him, but turned at the threshold.

"I bid the future Queen of Scots farewell," he said; and with a hearty chuckle he bowed low and was gone.

Anne Holcombe stood for a moment in the centre of her laundry, and could hardly realize that she was awake and had not dreamed this strange interview with the uncouth King. The sight of his purse tightly clutched in her hand proved to her the reality of his visit, and she gave a happy laugh as she felt its jingling contents. Of a sudden, however, her face paled in terror as she thought of the jester behind the screen, whose presence she had entirely forgotten in her confusion at the advent of the cloaked figure.

She drew a gasping breath and ran quickly to his retreat. He seemed to be in a state of complete stupefaction, and she shook him long and earnestly before he awoke and uttered a sleepy demand for his breakfast. She patiently fed him the broth, and when he had sunk back again upon his pillow she ran to her table and resumed her ironing, not without first concealing Philip's purse in her bosom.

A half-hour later Roger Covert darted hastily into the laundry and pressed a hearty kiss upon the lips of his buxom sweetheart.

She ran around the table and shook her finger at him over the pile of snowy linen.

"I am in no mood for love-making to-day," she said. "I have many pieces to iron and must carry this lace collar to the Scottish Queen. Take yourself away, Master Covert, and if you'll come again when night falls I will tell you something that will make you happy."

Roger laughed.

"How is my wise friend, the fool, faring?" he asked.

"See for yourself," pertly replied the maiden, and Roger stepped behind the screen. At his entrance, the eyes of the jester opened and he looked at Covert shrewdly, motioning with his head for the guardsman to approach.

Roger stepped to the side of his couch, saying:

"Why, the colour is coming back to your cheeks. By my faith, you are much improved."

"S-sh!" cautioned the jester in a low voice; "Master Covert, incline your ear to my lips. I have something of great importance to impart to you, but do not start or cry out or otherwise alarm the maiden at her tasks."

Covert wonderingly bent his head, and the fool spoke to him in an excited whisper:

"I was awakened from a deep sleep this morning by the sound of a closing door and men's voices in the laundry. Although they spoke in lowered tones, I heard distinctly every word of a compact that they made with the pretty laundress. The visitors were none other than King Philip and the Duke of Alva. Alva stood on guard while the King persuaded the maiden to enter his service by the offer of a fat purse. She is to bear a ruff to the imprisoned Queen at two o'clock to-day, and in the Tower will change her habit for that of Mary Stuart, who, in the guise of the laundress, will speed to freedom and will seek this place and her waiting friends, who will quickly bear her aboard ship and set sail for Spain."

"Great God! This is treachery," muttered the soldier.

"Softly, softly," whispered Pulsifer. "The maiden serves the King for love of you. She is to receive five hundred pounds, and through Sir Thomas Hatton's influence will escape punishment and keep her laundry. She pities Mary Stuart in her prison, and hopes to wed you when she receives the purse."

"Anne Holcombe must be spared," said Roger. "Nathelless, I must warn the Queen."

"Speed rather to your master. Mayhap he will find a way to block their plans by informing Elizabeth's maid of honour, who will be easier of approach."

"'Tis a good idea, Kyd, and I will act upon it. The hour draws nigh, and I must hasten. Do you still feign drowsiness and I will make my excuses to my love."

He left the bedside of the fool, and crossing to where the maid was busily engaged in piling up the finished garments, he snatched another kiss, saying: "The jester sleeps, and you do not desire my presence. I'll say farewell until to-night"; and he quickly left the room. The girl's suspicions were not aroused, as she was anxious to be alone, and to have the coast clear for her departure for the Tower.

Roger hastened toward Shakespeare's apartment, but found him on the terrace conversing with Juliet Florio. He apologized for his intrusion and asked for a few moments' conversation apart with his mas-

ter. Shakespeare excused himself to the maiden, and Roger drew him to one side, telling him quickly all he had heard at the laundry.

"I came to you, master, because you forbade me to reveal Sir Thomas Hatton's plot upon your life, and I feared to act without your instruction."

"This is a different affair," said Shakespeare, half to himself. "I am sworn to protect Her Majesty, and who knows but that the escape of Mary Stuart and her union with the Spanish King would not result in the fall and execution of our Queen? My duty is plain. I must warn Elizabeth. But the minutes fly and I know not how to approach her in time."

"Seek her favourite hand-maiden, master. She has access to her at all times and the conspiracy may be blocked. And if I may have been of any small service to you during the last few years, I beg you thereby to plead for the release of my sweetheart, Anne Holcombe."

"Mistress Hathaway may deny me speech, Roger. She has acted strangely of late."

"Nay, master, you must approach her boldy and command her attention."

"'Tis the only way," sighed Will, and he dismissed Covert, and accompanied Juliet to the apartment of her father. He then turned his steps toward the Queen's garden.

As he entered the enclosure, he saw Anne Hathaway in the midst of a bevy of court ladies who were romping on the grass and making the most of an hour of leisure. He strode across the walk and boldly addressed them:

"If her companions will permit me, I would have a moment's private conversation with the Lady Anne Hathaway."

The ladies chorused a laughing assent and quickly ran away, leaving Anne standing on the grass as rigid as though she were a marble statue.

"I hope you will forgive my intrusion," said Shakespeare, "but I have come to speak to you on a matter of vital importance."

The maid surveyed him coldly from head to foot for a moment, then turned upon her heel and calmly walked away.

The poet flushed, but ran quickly to her side.

"Mistress Hathaway," he pleaded eagerly, "I speak not on my own account; but the life of the Queen is in danger. My serving-man has unearthed a plot to free the Queen of Scots, and it was necessary to act at once; that is why I sought you here."

Anne stopped short and turned on him in amazement.

"Why do you come to me?" she asked. "You should have gone to Her Majesty at once."

"To save time, for moments are precious. You may gain her ear more quickly and break the news to her without alarming her."

The girl clasped her hands in perplexity.

"Tell me," she said, "the particulars of this conspiracy."

"The King of Spain and one of his nobles visited the Queen's laundress this morning and arranged with her to bear a ruff to Mary Stuart in the afternoon. She is to clothe the Queen in her apparel and

to remain in prison in her stead while she goes to her freedom and the Spanish King."

"And does their plot include Her Majesty?"

"Not at present. They are to set sail at once for Spain."

"God be praised for that!" said Anne. "The Queen is not safe while the Catholic monster remains at court."

"I beg you to inform Queen Elizabeth at once, Mistress Hathaway."

"Do you know the hour set for the intended escape?"

"The laundress is to leave her tubs when the sun's shadow falls upon the figure two on the dial."

"Then we must indeed make haste. 'Tis now past one o'clock. You may trust me to have it so arranged that the ship will sail without the Scottish Queen," said Anne, as she gathered up her skirt and turned toward the palace.

"Mistress Hathaway, I crave one boon of you ere you depart," said the poet; and she stood still, as a tremor of vague expectancy thrilled her heart. "As a reward for his revelation of the Spaniard's conspiracy, I beg that you will intercede with Queen Elizabeth to spare the laundress, Anne Holcombe, who is my guardsman's sweetheart, and who realizes not the wrong she does."

Anne turned once more toward Will Shakespeare.

"If it lies in my power the girl shall go free," she answered; "and I most humbly thank you on behalf of my Queen for your information and your interest in her welfare." She dropped him a low

curtsey and departed, leaving him standing on the walk with his cap crushed in his hand and looking with loving but despairing eyes after her vanishing form. She entered the castle and hurried to the Queen's chamber. She raised her hand to tap upon the door, when suddenly a strange thought struck her, and she dropped her arm and hastened to her own room.

"Why not manage this affair myself?" she mused, as she stood excitedly before her mirror and clasped the fastenings of her cloak about her throat. "If I tell the Queen, she'll summon Hatton and rouse the whole court, and she so dearly loves a fuss that to keep her favour we, her maidens, will have to indulge in hysterics for a week. Let me see. I must compose myself and wait until the laundress leaves for the prison, then I will follow close upon her heels. 'Twill be time enough to inform Her Majesty when Mary's wings are clipped."

Shortly after two o'clock, Anne Holcombe was admitted to the Tower and the gaoler opened Mary Stuart's cell and locked her in with the Queen, lazily pacing up and down the corridor until he should be summoned to let the maiden out with her bundle of soiled linen.

She had scarcely climbed the stairs when Anne Hathaway clanged the knocker of the prison door and commanded the keeper to summon Sir Amias Paulet. The man, recognizing one of the Queen's ladies, hurried to the noble's lodging, and in a moment the royal gaoler appeared in the hallway. When he saw Anne he smiled indulgently, for she

had ever been a favourite of his, and he welcomed her cordially.

"To what am I indebted for this call?" he asked.
"'Tis seldom I am honoured by a visit from one of the fair sex."

"O Sir Amias, Sir Amias," whispered the maiden, "there is a wicked plot afoot. The laundress who has just gone upstairs with a freshly ironed ruff for your prisoner intends to take her place, and Mary Stuart will soon come down disguised in the woman's habit. Stop her, I pray you, and save the throne of our Queen."

The keeper of the Tower held up his hands in horror.

"Poor woman!" he said. "Why did you tell me this? Her neck is even now in danger of the headsman's axe. 'Twere better far that she escaped. 'Twould spare Her Majesty's conscience a heavy burden."

"My Lord, you must not let your tender heart stand between you and your duty. We are both servitors of Elizabeth and may not prove false to our trust."

"True, true," replied Sir Amias, and hurried to the door of the prison.

The laundress came down the stairs, bearing a large bundle on her shoulder. Her shawl was pinned around her head and her face was almost concealed by the arm that crossed it to support her burden. The gaolers scarcely wasted a glance in her direction as she passed down the hallway.

She neared the door and her steps quickened. Sir Amias stepped in front of her, saying:

"The laundress bears a heavy load to-day."

She nodded, and was about to pass on, but he seized her arm and clasped it tightly.

"Surely those white hands were not meant to be dipped in steaming suds, your Majesty," he said, as he pulled aside her shawl and disclosed the features of the Queen of Scots.

Mary Stuart said never a word, but dropping the clothing she faced about and walked calmly up the stairs to her prison cell.

CHAPTER XVI

THE CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

Three months had elapsed since Mary Stuart's attempted escape and the flight of the Spanish King. The dignity of Her Majesty's court had been somewhat relaxed. The daily audiences in the throne-room were dispensed with for a time, and many of the courtiers left the castle at intervals for short holidays in the metropolis, or to visit their estates; while the Queen took a much-needed rest, spending a great portion of her time in her garden, where she was often attended by the Earl of Leicester, though her ladies were always present at the interviews.

Juliet Florio (as we will still call her) was made happy by the return of her husband, who had attained his majority, and who awaited but the resumption of the affairs of state to formally disclose his marriage to the Queen. The young people lived a blissful existence and Henry sadly neglected his friends, Essex, and Will Shakespeare, though they occasionally took him away from his wife's side for an expedition with them to the city, jokingly telling him that Mistress Wriothesley would tire of him if he so constantly inflicted his presence upon her.

Christmas day, in the year 1586, dawned bright and clear, but cold, and when the hand of the clock

pointed to the hour of noon, the tap-room of the famous Mermaid Inn in London presented a cheerful appearance. Here was gathered a choice company of the most congenial spirits, famous wits, and boon companions of Elizabeth's court. The many tables were covered with decanters of rare wine, mugs of ale and beer, and many different beverages to suit the varied fancies of the assemblage, while the atmosphere in the room was so thick with tobacco smoke that the roaring flames in the fire-place shone through the haze like a beacon in a dense fog.

At a table in the centre of the room sat Sir Walter Raleigh with his protege, Edmund Spenser, a poet of rising repute whom he sought to have presented at court. With them were Beaumont and Fletcher, both brilliant writers and wits.

Sir Francis Drake, with Governor Lane of the American colony of Virginia, and Selden, Cotton, and Doune occupied another table, and dotted about the room were several laughing nobles, amongst them Martin and Carew, while the Queen's Lord Chancellor sprawled on a bench by the fire, contentedly sucking at his pipe and listening to the sallies and flashes of repartee that constantly passed amongst the merry revelers.

The landlord and his servants were kept busy attending to the wants of the thirsty company, whose condition was considerably mellowed by its frequent indulgence in the Christmas cheer.

The tap-room soon became so noisy that it was impossible for the attendants to distinguish the courtiers' orders above the roars of laughter and the

sounds of clinking glasses, and they were compelled to give up in despair, setting out flasks and decanters, and mugs and tankards indiscriminately, all of which were quickly emptied, without protest, however.

In the midst of the confusion, Sir Walter Raleigh, the captain of the Queen's guard, arose and thundered with his fist upon the table. His action had the desired effect, and a state of comparative quiet ensued. He raised his arm on high.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I give you the health of our Queen"; and he drained his glass, while the company, with a roar of approval, followed suit.

Fletcher filled his cup again and sprang to his feet.

"And I drink to the destruction of her enemies!" he shouted, and the tumult rose louder than before.

Sir Francis Drake pushed back his chair and stood erect, as handsome a specimen of manly beauty as ever graced a queenly court.

"I give you a third toast," said he: "To the Devil with the Spanish King!"

In an instant every man in the room was on his feet, and a mighty shout shook the rafters. Then they drank long and deep and seated themselves in silence.

"You can trust Drake to send a man to hell, if ever he gets after him," said Beaumont; and a laugh went up as Carew retorted:

"Let us hope you are not consigned to the same dwelling, for your acrid tongue and King Philip's

plotting nature, were they in combination, would drive the Devil out of his abiding place."

"He has a torture chamber especially prepared for you, and eagerly awaits your coming. 'Tis a room where wits are converted into broiling bits," flashed Beaumont.

Governor Lane interposed, as the controversy was becoming heated:

"Gentlemen, I propose a song," he said. "Let Edmund Spenser favour us."

His speech was greeted with shouts of approval, while Fletcher, with a sweep of his arm, cleared the centre stand of glasses and decanters, which crashed in broken bits upon the floor. Martin, Cotton, and Doune came forward, and seizing the poet's chair, lifted seat and all and placed him on the table. A foaming tankard was thrust into his hand, and the eager courtiers drew closer to him and loudly shouted for him to ope his lips.

He surveyed them good-naturedly.

"Of what shall I sing?" he asked.

"In honour of Sir Walter Raleigh, who is responsible for the fragrant vapours that fill this cozy room," said Drake, "I would suggest that you eulogize his delightful weed."

His proposal was loudly seconded by the noisy throng, and Spenser pressed his hand to his brow for a moment, then arose, and placing one foot on the chair and raising his tankard on high, he spiritedly began:

"Oh fill me the bowl of my long clay pipe,
 And fetch me a mug of ale;
 They'll soothe the soul of a tired man
 When all endeavours fail.

I'll find repose in the curling smoke
 That wreathes my aching brain,
 For sweet surcease
 And dreams of peace
 Attend Tobacco's train."

CHORUS.

"Then Oho, my lads, let us drain a cup
 In worship at his shrine,
 There are many mighty kings on earth,
 But King Tobacco's mine,
 Oho,
 His brilliancy enslaveth me;
 Aye, King Tobacco's mine."

He repeated the chorus, in which his auditors lustily joined, and in response to their repeated clamours for another verse he went on :

"When Sir Walter brought the fragrant weed
 From the fair Virginia shore,
 A noble blessing he bestowed
 On England, evermore.

And never a thought of damsel coy,
 Of kings, or queens, or fools
 Dares to intrude
 With footsteps rude
 While King Tobacco rules."

CHORUS.

"Then Oho, my lads, let us join our hands,
 And dance around his throne,
 All minions of his scepter's sway,
 We're King Tobacco's own,
 Oho,
 With smoke rings dim we're bound to him;
 We're King Tobacco's own."

The revelers again joined in the second chorus, and when they had finished he drained the tankard, which was hastily taken from him and another full one was thrust in his hand. In the midst of the thunderous applause that followed, the tap-room door opened, and three belated guests entered. They were Robert Devereux, Will Shakespeare, and Henry Wriothesley. Chairs were quickly placed for them and they were served with liquors, and Lane demanded another verse for the benefit of the new arrivals.

Spenser, delighted at this chance to air his talent in the presence of Shakespeare, sang again :

"In the Mermaid Inn you will ever find
Disciples of this great King,
A-blowing clouds of fragrant smoke,
Unheedful of time's wing.

For they're one and all his willing slaves,
This band of merry wights ;
They banish care
To empty air,
Through Nicotine's delights."

CHORUS.

"Then Oho, my lads, let us bow our heads,
Submissive to his power,
And offer up our gratitude
For King Tobacco's dower,
Oho,
A legacy of smoke, you see,
Is King Tobacco's dower."

As Spenser finished, he leapt to the floor, and the new-comers heartily joined in the storm of hand-clapping that was sweet music to his flattered ears.

For a while the room was a-buzz with a lively discussion of the song, but gradually the company broke up into small groups and amused itself variously at the different tables. Two or three of the party, who had indulged too deeply, fell into a drunken sleep and were stowed away beneath the stands, while their companions went merrily on with their potations.

Finally an angry voice rose at the centre table and attracted the attention of all in the room:

"I tell you, Drake, you are dazzled by his standing with the Queen. Spenser is by far the cleverer of the two, and I challenge any one to gainsay it."

Southampton's ears pricked up, and Essex laid a restraining hand upon his arm, while Drake calmly endeavoured to pacify the excited captain.

"You must remember, Raleigh, that I have seen several of the playwright's comedies and heard his verses, while this is the only time that I have listened to your protégé."

"Let him once enter the Queen's suite," loudly said Sir Walter, "and Will Shakespeare's star will quickly wane."

Wriothesley threw off Essex's hand and strode in front of the captain.

"My Lord," he said coldly, "you will never see that day."

Raleigh grasped the table and arose a trifle unsteadily.

"My young and impudent Earl," he said, "Edmund Spenser is Shakespeare's superior in breeding, birth, and brain, and you dare not dispute it."

"That is a lie, Sir Knight," quickly answered the young noble.

Raleigh's face turned purple and he was sobered instantly. He seized a glass of sparkling wine and dashed it straight in Southampton's face, laughing hoarsely as the amber liquid trickled over the youth's embroidered doublet.

"We will soon see who is the better man of *us* two," he said, as Wriothesley wiped the smarting fluid from his eyes.

"The sooner the better, my Lord," answered Henry. "The Earl of Essex will represent me. Will you name your second, that they may arrange the necessary details at once?"

"Sir Thomas Hatton, if he will act," said Raleigh, stepping to the side of the Lord Chancellor.

Hatton quickly whispered in his ear:

"Sir Walter, I will arrange for a duel with the left hand. You know that it is your strong point and this youth will never have a chance against your practised arm." Raleigh nodded and smiled grimly, as Hatton walked to meet Devereux, who was crossing the room.

They bowed courteously as they met, and Hatton was the first to speak.

"My Lord," said he, "as all concerned desire a speedy termination to this affair, and as my principal is the challenged party, he names this room as the meeting-place, the duel to be fought with rapiers; and asserting his privilege, he selects the combat of the left hand, the right wrist to be bound tightly at the waist, that all present may be assured of fair play."

Essex paled visibly, but bowed.

"Sir Thomas," he said, "if you will despatch the inn-keeper for a chirurgeon we will prepare ourselves for the duello at once."

The guests eagerly joined the servants in clearing the room. The chairs and tables were carried to the kitchen, while the broken bits of glass were swept from the floor, which was carefully sanded, and the burning tapers were divided in equal numbers and placed at the ends of the room. The drunken courtiers were dragged before the fireplace, while the rest of the revelers ranged themselves in long lines on either side of the tap-room.

When the chirurgeon arrived the contestants were stripped to the waist, and their right arms were bound tightly to their sides, despite the protests of several of the more prominent nobles at this novel and barbarous style of combat.

Rapiers were selected from a stand that was kept at the Inn in anticipation of a contingency like the present one, and the stern captain and fair youth faced each other and stood on guard in the centre of the room.

'Twas an odd picture as the flickering light fell fitfully on the assemblage, the faces of the spectators showing paler in their trepidation than those of the principals.

Sir Thomas Hatton and Essex took their stations, and, as the word was given, the swords met with a ringing clash of steel, and the sparks flew with lightning rapidity from the flashing weapons.

Southampton was more agile than his older opponent, and circled around him, making many swift lunges and passes which were dexterously parried by Sir Walter's steady arm. Ere long the young Earl was breathing heavily, though the captain had scarce stirred from his original position, and it was soon evident that the contest could have but one termination.

Wriothesley, rendered furious by a laughing taunt from Raleigh, forgot his caution and made a reckless lunge. His adversary coolly stepped aside, and as Southampton overbalanced and fell toward him he quickly stiffened his arm, transfixing the poor youth's neck with his rapier.

As a stream of blood spurted from Henry's throat, he dropped his weapon and sank to his knees. The captain drew his sword from the wound, and turning toward the fireplace, calmly wiped the blood from it upon the garments of one of the besotted wits.

Shakespeare, Essex, and the chirurgeon quickly ran to Wriothesley's side, and began tenderly to examine his hurt.

Raleigh strutted in front of the fire.

"If there be any other present who wishes to maintain Will Shakespeare's superiority, he may do so on the same terms," he challenged in a sneering tone.

Essex quickly lifted his head; then leaping to his feet, he strode swiftly across the room and brought his gauntlet with stinging force across the insolent captain's mouth.

"I'll take Southampton's place," he said, as he stripped off his jerkin and picked up the rapier of

the vanquished Earl. "I need no second. If Sir Thomas Hatton will bind my right arm, I'll give this braggart lord a taste of cold steel for his Christmas dinner!"

"You'll never live till the repast is served!" fiercely answered Raleigh, as he stepped to the centre of the room. "I am sorry for the other poor fool's wound, but I will take delight in slaying you, my dear enemy."

They fell too eagerly, and the spectators realized ere long that here was indeed a contest to the death.

The moment that Sir Walter felt the touch of Essex's steel he knew that he was dealing with a master hand, and that he must use his utmost strength and skill if he would come out of the duel unscathed.

Each contestant watched with hawklike eyes the features of his opponent, and never a thrust was made without a skilful parry or a quick recovery. For some moments they stood in the centre of the room moving only their left arms, while their feet seemed fixed to the sanded floor; then Raleigh drew back stealthily and of a sudden made a furious onset, striving to break down Essex's guard.

The Earl's sword was here, there, and everywhere, though his face retained its calm smile and his body scarcely turned, and Sir Walter soon realized that his defense was impenetrable and changed his tactics. He began to circle slowly around his adversary, and to feint and change his step with the hope of bewildering Devereux. But he underrated his man, for Essex met him at every point, then suddenly attacked the captain in return.

Raleigh was forced to retreat rapidly around the room, and it soon became evident that the famous swordsman had met his match.

Essex, with a triumphant smile, closed in upon him, seeking to deliver a finishing blow, when his foot slipped in a pool of Henry Wriothesley's blood, and he fell heavily to his hip upon the sanded floor.

With a hoarse cry of joy, the captain rushed forward with the intention of stabbing his prostrate enemy to the heart; but with marvelous agility the Earl raised his arm and caught his adversary's sword upon his own blade, with a dexterous twist sending it flying far across the room. A cry of admiration arose from the spectators, and there were many hisses for Raleigh's cowardly action.

Essex got upon his feet and addressed the captain, who stood sullen and ashamed before him.

"'Twas a dastardly act," he said, "and by the rules of the duello your life is forfeit to me through your foul play. But I scorn to take advantage of the code. Pick up your weapon, and I will give you one more chance for your craven existence, though you have no honour."

As Sir Thomas Hatton handed him his rapier, Raleigh addressed the excited throng:

"In all my life," said he, "I have never before been accused of cowardice. I tender my apology to the Earl for my murderous act. My temper overleapt its bounds, for which I am heartily ashamed, and I thank him publicly for his forbearance."

A murmur of approbation attended his speech, but Essex said nothing and they again engaged in the duel.

The captain's hand seemed to have lost its cunning, and Essex forced him around the room at will, time and again scorning to take advantage of an opening. At last he spoke.

"Sir Walter," he said, "you are committing suicide. 'Tis a pitiful exhibition for the most expert swordsman in England."

Again Raleigh's temper took fire, but his arm stiffened and he made a fierce attack upon the Earl. With desperate fury he hurled his heavy form upon his lighter antagonist, and the excited witnesses were surprised to see Devereux retreat before his assault.

The captain's eyes flashed with returning hope, and, with a swift overhand thrust, he sought to end the battle. Essex stooped quickly, and as Sir Walter's sword missed him by a hairsbreadth his left arm shot out and his rapier entered Raleigh's breast above the heart, completely piercing his stalwart frame, the point showing under his shoulder. He fell backward, his own weight releasing Essex's sword, which the Earl still tightly clutched; and his life-blood welled out in a crimson pool upon the sand as his senses left him.

Devereux surveyed him calmly for a moment, then turned upon his heel and walked to the side of his injured friend, whose wound had been stanched by the bandages of the chirurgeon.

"Another patient needs your attention," he said. Then, bending over, he whispered in Shakespeare's ear:

"Do you, Will, quickly summon a coach, that we may bear Henry to a suitable lodging and provide

him with the best of medical attendance. Then I will remain with him while you proceed to Windsor and break the news most gently to his wife, and if she bravely bears the shock you must straightway accompany her to his bedside.

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER DID

When Shakespeare and Essex had found a comfortable lodging for their wounded friend in a quiet inn near the old school, they summoned an eminent doctor, who, after a careful examination of Southampton's injury, pronounced his condition as extremely dangerous but declared that with the best of nursing he had a slim chance for life. Raleigh's sword had missed a vital spot by but a narrow margin, and the wound was very difficult to close. It was well-nigh impossible for the Earl to swallow, even liquid nourishment; and the doctor forbade his friends to allow him to speak until he gave his permission. He bled his patient, and left a sleeping-draught, with directions as to his care until his next visit.

When he had gone, Essex turned to Shakespeare, saying:

"Will, you must hasten to Windsor as fast as a good horse can carry you. 'Tis Juliet's right to be at her husband's side, and her presence will soothe him. If you waste no time you may return by night-fall and she may be brought here quietly, and I will undertake that no suspicious eyes will witness her approach."

Shakespeare obtained a horse from the landlord and set out for the palace as fast as the flying hoofs could travel, and late in the afternoon he rode into the empty court-yard. He sought his guardsman, Roger Covert, whom he quickly found at Anne Holcombe's laundry, and directed him to have two of the best horses in the stables saddled and brought to Master Florio's apartments at once. Covert ran to obey, and Will hurried to the lodgings of his old teacher. He found Juliet and her father in the study, and as she saw his troubled face she sprang to her feet with an intuition of disaster.

"Why, Master Shakespeare, where is Henry?" she asked. "He told me that he was going to London for a few hours with you and Robert Devereux; that he wanted to purchase me a Christmas token and would return early. Why do you come here alone? Has any injury befallen him?"

"Your husband lies wounded at a tavern in London. I was the innocent cause of a duel between Sir Walter Raleigh and himself. The chirurgeon gives us much encouragement, but we feel that he would rest more quietly were you at hand to-night. I have come to take you to him at once, and with your father's permission will arrange that you may lodge at his school, where you will have your maidens to attend you."

The distressed bride gave way to a fit of violent weeping at the news of this pitiful interruption of her honeymoon, and John Florio took her in his loving arms, caressing her gently and endeavouring to soothe her with words of encouragement for her husband's recovery.

Shakespeare stood, uncertain what to do, until his embarrassment was relieved by Roger's arrival with the horses. Then he stepped to Florio's side and took the beautiful girl by the hand, saying :

"Juliet, if you will change your habit, we will set out for London at once. 'Twould not be well to have darkness catch us ere we reach the town."

She was aroused at the thought of immediate action, and quickly drying her eyes and stifling her sobs, she ran into her room and soon emerged apparelled for her journey.

Will assisted her to mount, and as they were crossing the portion of the court-yard opposite the royal apartments Anne Hathaway came to a window to draw a tapestry and shut out the rays of the declining sun from the Queen's chamber. The figures of the riders attracted her attention, and as she recognized the poet and the Italian maid setting forth on the London road at this late hour of the afternoon, she felt a sudden sinking at her heart, and her bosom heaved with a strange emotion while she stood staring through the castle gates long after their forms had faded from view.

Finally she drew a sharp breath that sounded not unlike a sob, and turning quickly, left the window, all forgetful of the open blind, and sought her own room.

On the road to the city Will Shakespeare told Juliet the story of the duels, and her eyes filled anew at his description of Wriothesley's bravery and his unfortunate injury; but despite her agonized fear for her husband's condition she could not refrain

from clapping her hands when she heard of Essex's action and the severe wounding of the captain of the guard.

They arrived at the inn as the winter twilight was falling, and not a soul espied their entrance to Southampton's apartments. Essex opened the door for them, and Juliet ran to Henry's couch and threw herself upon her knees at his side. He was wide awake and perfectly conscious, and stretched out his hand, which she seized eagerly and covered with her loving kisses. Though he could not speak he communicated his love to her by a tight pressure of her hands, and she arose and laid aside her cloak with the determination of remaining with him throughout the night. As her back was turned he looked piteously at Essex, who interpreted his glances.

"Nay, Juliet," he said, "it would not do for you to stay. 'Twould cause talk if any one should find it out ere your marriage is announced, and though my Lord Bishop Kitchen might aver until he was black in the face that he wedded you full three months back, they would prefer not to believe it, so dearly do they love to wag a scandalous tongue. Henry is much cheered by your visit, and the doctor has left a sleeping-potion which I will administer, that he may have a long period of repose.

"Let Will accompany you to the school, and when he returns he'll gladly share with me the pleasant duty of ministering to your devoted lover and our dear friend."

Juliet silently took up her cloak and drew it round her shoulders, saying:

“You are right, my Lord, and I am grateful for your wisdom.”

She knelt once more at Henry’s bedside, and clasping her dainty hands she bowed her lovely head and uttered a short but fervent prayer for his recovery.

“Surely a just God will not deny the appeal of this innocent maiden,” whispered Essex, as he stood in mute admiration of her holy affection for her youthful husband.

She arose, and stooping over the bed, pressed a gentle kiss on Wriothesley’s brow, then turning to his friends she laid her hand confidingly on Shakespeare’s arm and departed with him for her father’s school.

“If ever an angel came to earth,” said Essex, “one walks in the guise of your beautiful wife, Henry”; and he gave Southampton the sleeping-draught.

Wriothesley’s wound healed slowly but surely, and so strong was the power of life and love in his youthful frame that, before January was a fortnight old, Juliet felt justified in returning to her father at Windsor, though she made frequent visits to London in the company of Will Shakespeare, few of which escaped the eyes of the vigilant Anne Hathaway; though the other inmates of the royal household seemed oblivious of their coming or going.

One day the Queen sent for her favourite maid, and when Anne answered her summons she dis-

missed the other attendants from the room. When they were alone Elizabeth addressed the girl affectionately.

"Be seated, my dear," said she, "and let us exchange confidences as though we were two simple maidens. Forget for a while that I am a Queen. 'Tis only by accident of birth that I rule England, and no doubt were you in my place you would surpass me by the brilliancy of your reign."

"Nay, your Majesty," said Anne. "There was never so popular a ruler in the history of the world. From the first day of your ascendancy to the throne your subjects have loved you, and so gently have you used the scepter of your power that you have brought not only the courtiers and attendants of the royal train in worship at your feet, but the lowest peasant in this broad isle would gladly give up his life, that he might be one of the many humble instruments to protect your kingdom from the forces of an invading usurper."

"Do you love me so much, Anne?"

"You know that I am your slave. I love my country, but I love my Queen more. And were such an unforeseen event as your dethronement to occur, I would quickly forsake England and ask nothing better than to accompany you in your banishment to some solitary region, where we might live our lives anew, finding contentment in our memory of the past and the power that had flown."

"May God prevent such a catastrophe!" shuddered the Queen. "But is there not one of all the nobles in my court to whom your heart inclines?

The others of my ladies have admirers by the score, and spend much of their time in love-passages with their gallants; but you, my dear, are ever at my hand, though I cannot understand your shunning of the sterner sex. Surely it is not for want of suitors, for you are the handsomest and haughtiest of all my maids, and full many languishing glances have I seen cast in your direction at the audiences in the throne-room."

Anne Hathaway dropped her eyes in confusion, but said nothing, and the Queen went on :

"First King Philip importuned me to bestow your hand upon the Spaniard, Don Gomez de Silva; and though it irked me much to give the monarch offense, I loved you too well to sacrifice your happiness, and at your request I flatly denied his prayer."

"For which I am deeply grateful," murmured Anne.

"But when another lover, nearer home, approached me," said Elizabeth, "I was much inclined to encourage his suit, for I believed that he would make a worthy husband for my proud maid. Besides, in your song before the good Lord Bishop, you led me to believe that it was he whom you preferred to Philip's minister."

"Nay, I referred to no one in particular, your Majesty. I simply wished to be freed from the attentions of the odious Spaniard."

"And has the handsome Sir Thomas Hatton no attraction for you, Anne? For a while he reveled in the sunshine of your smiles and was a constant attendant upon your moments of leisure. Methinks

you gave him much cause to hope, but of a sudden he has forsaken this portion of the court and I see him but briefly, when affairs of business so demand, and his usually smiling countenance wears a changed and sobered look."

"O your Majesty, if I desired De Silva little for a husband, I do desire Sir Thomas less. I pray you that you will never countenance his suit, for I assure you that he is unworthy to touch a pure maiden's hand. I beg that you will not question me further, but that you will believe that I have the best of reasons for never speaking to the base Chancellor again."

The Queen raised her eyebrows in amazement.

"I suppose Hatton has his faults," she said, "but you know that this is an age of much wickedness. And you cannot expect to find a courtier of absolutely spotless character."

"Nay. But they are not steeped through and through with wickedness. Oh, let us seek to forget his existence. Don Gomez was a paragon compared to him."

"Why, you open my eyes, maid. I must hereafter be less confiding with my Lord. Since first I placed him in office, he has had almost unlimited power at court, and I have trusted many state secrets to his keeping."

"Then do so no more, your Majesty; for though I am but a humble attendant of your suite, I can assure you that I have rendered you better, aye far better, service than this treacherous noble."

"Anne, if any other but you cast an aspersion on the Chancellor's character, I would laugh him to scorn; but the truth is ever shining in your fearless eyes, and I will so hedge his office with trusted guards that he will be powerless to injure me, though he will remain in ignorance of my precaution. But we must find a husband for you. How would you like the playwright Shakespeare for a mate?"

"No, no!" protested the maiden. "The poet least of all. I do not consider him an honourable man."

The Queen stared aghast at the girl.

"Anne," she said, "what has got into your head of late? You are indeed hard to please. The young man has ever seemed to me the most gentle and dignified of all my train."

"He is carrying on an intrigue with a poor deluded maiden, your Majesty, as I discovered recently by accident."

"Well, well, Anne, to find a good man for you I am afraid that I will have to give in to Kitchen and countenance marriage amongst the clergy. Then we may pick out some sanctimonious bishop who has lived the life of a recluse from the world. Surely he will be untainted."

"Your Majesty, I want no man. I am satisfied to remain in the single state, and what better reason can I give than to take you for my illustrious example? You have never seen fit to wed, and your life has ever been attended by fame and happiness."

The Queen arose, and walking to the girl's side, took her chin in her hand, and raising her head,

looked long and tenderly into her lovely face with its downcast eyes.

"My dear," she said, at length, "I would cry aloud in my happiness, I would wave my arms in defiance of the whole world, and I would fairly dance for joy, if I could this moment change places with you for good and all and let you assume the cares and duties of my throne. You would see how quickly Elizabeth would hunt up a minister and marry the man of her choice. Oh! If I only dared, I would snap my fingers at them all and make Robert Dudley my lord and master without delay."

"The chains of royalty are fetters, my beauty; and being once a queen I must always remain a queen. But I cannot deny my hungry soul forever, and if King Philip, and the Frenchman, and other troublesome potentates will ever give me an instant's respite from their ardent wooing, I will that minute wed my Earl, and casting all thought of political complications to the winds, I will rely upon his love and his strong arm to guide me and my kingdom safely through the turbulent sea of their wrath and disapproval."

"Anne's heart was stirred with sympathy for this woman, who, though all-powerful in her mighty nation, was still powerless in the court of love. She seized the Queen's hand and kissed it fervently, saying:

"If I were in your place, my wonderful Queen, and loved as you do, I fear I would sacrifice my throne, my country, and even my friends to the

strong fever of my passion. But, alas, the wedded state is not for me. I care not enough for any man."

"Nonsense, girl. It is but human nature, and you must be moved by its mighty force as well as I. Why, your pretty face, your dimpling cheeks, your ruby lips are an eloquent appeal for loving caresses.

"You wear a veritable mask of love, and so thoroughly do I believe that our exterior graces are but the mirror of our inward feelings, that I do declare you are in love even now, though you deny it to yourself. Didst ever notice the sweethearts at my court, billing and cooing, sighing and pining; the dainty wenches waxing prettier every day when fed on Cupid's food to the neglect of their stomachs? Their clear complexions, sparkling eyes, and rosy cheeks all weapons to assist in capturing the amorous swains. But when, forsooth, they marry, and turn their minds to material comfort, they soon grow fat, and as they lose their romance become great feeders. But you and I, girl, are not of that ilk. We were born to love, we live in love, and will die of love.

"There, Anne," she said, as the maiden looked up in wonder, "I am a foolish woman, and should leave philosophy to my Lord Bishop. Do you know that I have a mind to transform you into a Queen to-day, my dear, though but for an hour, alas?"

"Why, what do you mean, your Majesty?"

Elizabeth ran to her wardrobe and took out an elegant black robe that she frequently wore in her apartments.

"Come hither, and seat yourself by the bed," she said. "Now, Queen Anne, I will be your maid and you must let me robe you as I will."

She unfastened the wondering girl's gown and slipped it from her form; she then garbed her in her robe and clasped its fastenings. Lifting an enormous ruff from the bed, she placed it around her neck, and going to her dresser brought a large wig of reddish brown hair which she always wore when in the presence of her courtiers, and fitted it upon Anne Hathaway's head. When she had finished, she surveyed the girl with a look of approval. Then she placed a small gilt chair near the window, turning it so that it faced inward.

"Now, my dear, I think that you will do very nicely," she said. "Seat yourself in the chair, but keep your back religiously turned toward the window, and there is never a courtier or lady in my garden but will swear that the Queen did not forsake her apartment this afternoon. Remain quietly at your station until I return, and you will add another service to the many you have rendered me. I will lock the door, and if any one knocks, do you answer that I will not be disturbed."

"Whither do you go, your Majesty?" Anne asked, as Elizabeth threw a cloak about her shoulders and pulled the hood over her face.

"I depart, as a simple maiden of your court, Queen Anne, to keep tryst with my lover, Robert Dudley, in Cardinal Wolsey's tomb-house. I go by the secret passage, and this time I go—alone."

The panel flew open at her pressure, and as she vanished it closed with a sharp click, and Anne heard her faint footfalls in the dark and narrow hallway.

"She is a brave woman," murmured the maiden, "and she is fortunate in her love. The Earl of Leicester will ever prove steadfast. Why am I denied the love of a good man? My heart cries for a strong nature to rule and master me. O Will Shakespeare! I begin to realize that I had raised you on a pedestal and was a worshipper at your shrine, until the intoxicating beauty of the Italian girl won your love and caused your fall; and now that my idol is broken I care not who may seek my hand, for I will love him not. Your gentleness appealed to me from the first, though I wilfully deceived myself, until your patient endurance of my insults and your bravery on the barge brought me to my senses. And now it is too late! Too late!"

She sat for a long time with clenched hands and tightly closed lips, until at last she could restrain herself no longer, and the tears welled to her eyes.

"Oh, Will!" she sobbed. "Even now, after your shameful adventures to London with your wicked mistress, if you would come to me and say: 'Anne, I want you for my wife,' I would raise my voice to Heaven in joyful praise for my happiness, and would fall gladly into your arms; for God help me, Will, I love you, I love you with all my heart, and I care not how soon my miserable life ends since I cannot have you."

She burst into a violent fit of weeping, and, forgetful of her duty, of her Queen, of everything save her love, she left her chair and threw herself upon the royal couch, giving way to her despair in a torrent of tears.

When Elizabeth returned through the panel, she was amazed to see her hand-maiden lying upon her bed, her frame shaking with suppressed sobs; but so wonderful was the chastening influence of her own love upon her nature that she forbore even to censure the girl for her dereliction of duty.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE QUEEN OF SCOTS

Sir Amias Paulet entered Mary Stuart's prison-room in Fotheringay Castle, where she had been confined ever since her trial and conviction on the charge of conspiracy against Queen Elizabeth's life. The judges had passed the sentence of death with but one dissenting voice. But Her Majesty had, as yet, failed to sign the warrant of execution, evading the issue whenever it was pressed upon her, and seeming loath to take the life of the condemned woman.

"Your Highness," said Sir Amias, "I am in receipt of a most cruel missive from Windsor, and one that makes my very blood boil at the base motives of its sender. Davison, the Queen's secretary, has requested me to act upon my own responsibility and to take your life, either by poison or by having you smothered in your cell. Thus Elizabeth would shift the odium of your death upon my shoulders, and would no doubt reward me handsomely, while declaring to the world that she abhorred the act and had contemplated your pardon."

As Mary sat in her chair her cheek paled and the chill of despair settled upon her heart, but she spoke calmly:

"I am in your power, my Lord. You may do with me as you will and I shall blame you not. 'Twill indeed save much trouble to her officers and her headsman."

"Nay. I am not so low as other servants who urge my treachery. I sent the messenger back at full speed to the castle, curtly telling them that I would serve my Queen and my country as long as it lay in my power honourably so to do, but that before I would countenance your Majesty's execution I demanded Elizabeth's signature and the great seal of England upon the warrant."

"How can I thank you, Sir Amias? You may lose your office and mayhap your life for this defiance."

"I care not; for a clear conscience and the knowledge that I have acted an honourable part are more to me than rank or fortune. But this attempt portends much evil. You must strike quickly if you would avert the fate that they are preparing for you. France and Spain have already interposed in your behalf; and if you would send a messenger to the Queen, I will do all in my power to set him speedily on his road. Your minister, Sir James Melville, who is visiting you, is a shrewd gentleman and well known at the French and Spanish courts. He is your loyal subject, and would lay down his life in your service. Let him hasten to Elizabeth, and use his best endeavours to soften her heart and cause her to remit your punishment. If he advocates banishment to France, Her Majesty may so incline, for there you will be unable to do her any harm."

"And I wish her none," said Mary Stuart, "though she has kept me a close prisoner for eighteen years and robbed me of my health and beauty. Still I would freely forgive her and pray for her salvation if I might walk in the free air again and once more see my son. But your advice is good, and I will despatch Melville at once, though the fates tell me that my doom is sealed."

"Be of stout heart, your Majesty. While there is life, hope remains," said Paulet, and he departed in search of the Scottish Ambassador.

Late the following afternoon, as Elizabeth was seated in her garden in conversation with the Earl of Leicester, her secretary, Davison, hurried across the terrace, and bowing profoundly, informed her that an envoy had arrived from Mary Stuart and insisted upon seeing her at once. Her brows contracted in an ominous frown and she stamped her foot impatiently :

"I thought Paulet would have rendered her incapable of sending messages ere this, Davison. Though he is one of the company sworn to protect my life, he is luke-warm in carrying out my express command."

"Your Majesty, he refuses to act without your commission, duly delivered in correct form."

"Does the damned, soft-hearted fool think to continue in my favour if he thus mocks my authority?" snorted the angry Queen. "Dudley, what think you? Shall we send this fellow scuttling back to Fotheringay accompanied by the bearer of his sovereign's death-warrant?"

"Nay, your Majesty. 'Twere wiser to receive the message that he bears."

Elizabeth thought a moment.

"Davison," she said, "ask my ladies to withdraw, and send Melville to me here; nay, Leicester, I desire your presence at the interview," she quickly interposed, as the Earl rose to depart with the secretary. He reseated himself, and in a few moments Sir James Melville was ushered into the garden.

The Queen was much struck with his manly beauty and noble bearing, and smiled graciously in response to his deferential bow.

"You come from Mary Stuart?" she said, shortly.

"Yes, your Majesty. But I act also on the authority of the Kings of Spain and France, whose commission I bear. You have kept the Scottish Queen a prisoner for many weary years, and we do now most humbly petition that you grant her her life, on condition that she will forever take up her residence in France and add her vows to the king's plighted word that she will never set foot upon English soil again, or by word of mouth or secret act instigate rebellion or interfere with your authority as Queen of England and Scotland."

Elizabeth looked at Leicester. "By my faith, he speaks fairly," said she, "and does much incline me to a gracious mood. Eighteen years of prison life must indeed have broken her indomitable spirit, and if she were at Paris I need never trouble my head about her again. Besides, Philip has no taste for meddling with the affairs of France, and will not

further press his suit upon Mary. Sir James, what would you say if I granted pardon to your Queen?"

"I would say that you have risen above all thoughts of self in your nobility, and that I will ever defend thy fame from its detractors, with my life if need be, and I would humbly bow my head and kiss the hem of your gown in gratitude for your clemency to my beautiful mistress."

"Is she so beautiful, Melville?"

"As the day is long, your Majesty."

"Is she more pleasing to look upon than I?"

Sir James, with ready wit, saw the tendency of her remarks and determined to work upon her vanity.

"Most noble Queen," he answered tactfully, "your beauty is imperishable, and none dare hope to match it."

Elizabeth smiled contentedly, and, picking up a lute that lay on the sward by her chair, she softly thrummed its strings for a moment and then sang in a full rich voice a verse of a melodious love song, while the minister bowed his head in rapt attention.

When she had finished she cast aside the instrument.

"And how does she compare with me in musical attainments?"

Sir James clasped his hands.

"Your Majesty is a veritable Loreley," he said, "and would lure your hearers on to swift and certain destruction with your wondrous notes."

The Queen simpered and reveled in his flattery, though it was hard for the honest Scotchman to

conceal his disgust; but he had a part to act and must proceed with caution if he would save his mistress.

She then conversed with him in German, in Spanish, and in French, entering into a discussion of the peculiarities of each language, and asking him if Mary Stuart was as expert a linguist as herself.

"Nay. Though she speaks each tongue moderately well, she does still mar them somewhat with the Scottish accent, while the fluency of your Majesty's speech may not be disputed."

Elizabeth's nature expanded under his compliments.

"Leicester," she said, "I can see no danger in this woman. She is so far beneath me in intellectual accomplishments that surely none would turn to her standard, even if she remained in England."

The light of hope shone in Melville's eyes, and she arose and again addressed him:

"How does she compare with me in stature?" she asked.

"Mary Stuart is the taller of the two," he answered.

"Then she is wrongly proportioned," quickly retorted the Queen, "for as all the world knows, I am of exactly the right height for a woman, and of perfect symmetry."

"'Tis undisputed, your Majesty," said Melville, with a bow.

Her next move almost took his breath away, and caused even the imperturbable Leicester to frown. She stepped to the centre of the walk and, drawing

up her train, seized her skirts in both hands, and raising them almost to her knees began stepping off the measures of the latest court dance, which had been recently introduced from France. As her spirits arose in her enthusiasm she forgot all thoughts of modesty, and whirled through its mazes with much abandonment and a generous display of queenly hosiery.

Melville was deeply shocked at this vulgar action of the Queen, and when she stopped suddenly, and holding her hand over her rapidly beating heart turned her flushed face to him and panted:

"Does she rival me in the Terpischorean art?" he could not help replying:

"My mistress does dance lower and more disposedly than your Majesty."

Instantly he saw his mistake, for the Queen turned upon him with flashing eyes, fairly screaming in her rage.

"Then she will never dance again!" she shouted. "Get you gone from my palace as fast as your Scotch legs can carry you, and tell your mistress to prepare her neck for the kiss of the executioner's blade. Ope not your lips or I will lay my hand across your mouth. I'll show the slut who is mistress of England."

Leicester rose to protest, but Elizabeth turned upon him in her fury:

"'Twill be time enough for your suggestions when you share my throne, Robert Dudley," she said; "and if you would not be dismissed with this ambassador forever from my court, you will seek

Davison at once and command him to bring me Mary Stuart's death-warrant in readiness for my signature." She turned upon her heel and entered the palace, going at once to the royal chamber.

On the third day of February, Sir James Melville rode dejectedly into the courtyard of Fotheringay Castle, and gaining admittance sought his sovereign at once. She greeted him eagerly, but his downcast countenance quickly stifled the hope in her breast.

"Your Highness," he said, "you must prepare yourself for the worst. I have failed in my attempt; and 'twere better that I had never sought the Queen, for it was through the agency of my own faithless tongue that your doom was finally sealed"; and he related to her the details of his strange interview with England's ruler.

When he had finished, the Queen took both his hands in hers and looked gently into his tearful eyes.

"Nay, I know your faithful heart too well, Sir James," said she; "'twas through no fault of yours that I am to die. Elizabeth but sought an excuse to condemn me, and acted thus in mockery of your attempt to save me."

"Do you fear the end, my Queen?" he asked.

"Nay. He is not worthy of the joys of Heaven whose body cannot suffer the stroke of the executioner, and I will welcome his sharp blade, for it will set my tortured spirit free. No one knows the agony I have endured through all the years."

"There is one hope, your Majesty. If you will renounce your faith, Elizabeth will be compelled to spare your life."

Mary Stuart's eyes flashed fire, and she answered Melville almost fiercely:

"I was born a Catholic, and I will die a Catholic. I thought you a better friend than to counsel the destruction of my soul's salvation. Though mortal hands may sever the thread of my life, they cannot prevent my triumphant spirit from dwelling in immortality in the true faith."

Four days afterwards, the Earls of Kent and Shrewsbury arrived at Fotheringay, bearing the Queen's warrant for Mary Stuart's execution. Though it was late in the evening, they commanded Sir Amias Paulet to convey them to her chamber, where with cruel abruptness they read to her the fatal document.

Contrary to their expectation, she listened calmly until they had done, and then gave a sigh of relief and smiled sweetly, as though their visit was most welcome. She asked the hour set for her death, and, when told that she must be in readiness by eight o'clock the following morning, she bowed and said, "I must arise early, my Lords," and turned away.

When they had withdrawn she summoned her weeping servants and divided her articles of jewelry and personal adornment impartially amongst them. She then dismissed them saying she had some letters to write, bidding only Sir James Melville to remain.

She dictated her will to her sobbing minister and, that done, directed him to bring her parchment and a quill. The first epistle she indited was to Elizabeth. It was brief and bore no malice. It read:

"DEAR MADAME: I freely forgive you for the punishment you are inflicting upon me, and my last prayer on the scaffold will be that you may be converted to my faith. You and I have both loved, and it has been my destruction; but I entreat you to make amends in honourable wedlock with Robert Dudley for the long years that you have spent in secret amours with the Earl. 'Tis the only way in which you may hope to enter the Kingdom of Heaven and avoid the tortures of hell.

"I most humbly thank you for my soul's release from its earthly shell. My one regret is that I may not embrace my boy, who will one day be the King of England.

"Your sister Queen and resigned cousin,
"MARYE STUART."

She sealed the letter and requested Melville to address it; then she wrote a brief farewell to the French monarch, and a longer letter to the King of Spain, closing it with the following paragraph:

"And I do beseech your Majesty to fit out a fleet and to attack the Island at the earliest opportunity. The parsimonious Queen does deny her ministers appropriations for the outfitting of an army and for the provision of proper defenses against besiegers. The unprepared condition of her sea-coast, and the

crews of her ships, turned mutinous by ill-treatment and lack of pay, will render the contest simple for your trained and mighty forces. I feel confident that you will spread our faith throughout the Protestant Ruler's kingdom, and will consummate her downfall, though I am denied the privilege of sharing your throne and your success. I will never see you again upon this earth, but I die happy in the knowledge that we will abide together in Eternity."

When she had entrusted her last letter to Melville, she begged him to leave her, saying that she would seek repose, and enjoined him to awaken her at sunrise. He seized her hand and kissed it fervently, sobbing like a child as he left the room. She sought her couch as soon as he had gone and slept peacefully until morning, when she was aroused by her mournful attendants. She arose and robed herself with elaborate care in a skirt and bodice of black satin, over which she placed a long mantle trimmed with fur and embroidered with gold. She wore a head-dress of white crepe and a long veil trimmed with lace, and around her neck she hung a chain of golden beads, from which was suspended a heavy cross.

She had barely completed her toilet when there was a loud summons at her door and the Earls entered to conduct her to the scaffold. She begged their indulgence for a brief space, and, kneeling at her altar, she prayed for the forgiveness of her enemies and her future salvation. Then she arose unassisted and signified her readiness. Sir Amias Paulet stepped forward and offered her his arm,

which she took with a murmured expression of her gratitude, and holding her cross tightly in her free hand was conducted to the Hall of Execution.

The great room was draped in black and in the centre was a huge scaffold covered with black cloth, on which rested a low stool and the headsman's block. She walked firmly to the scaffold, ascending it with Sir Amias's assistance, and seated herself calmly upon the stool. As she surveyed the group of nobles who had come to do the bidding of their Queen, a ray of the morning sun, which struck through an upper window, shone briefly upon her handsome face and cast a dazzling reflection from the golden cross in her hand. The witnesses were amazed to see the change which her last imprisonment had effected in the unfortunate Queen. Her hair was as gray as a woman's of twice her age, though her features still preserved their youthful beauty; and a wave of pity thrilled the breasts of every inmate of the chamber as she bowed her head to listen to the reading of the death-warrant.

When it had been completed she raised her cross on high and prayed in Latin to her Saviour, hearing which the Dean of Petersborough stepped to her side and offered her the consolation of his prayers.

"Nay," she said, "I am not of your faith. You do not recognize the true cross, which is my comfort, and which will be the last image in my glazing eyes when the executioner has done his work."

He insisted upon serving her, but she turned to Sir Amias Paulet, saying:

"May I not be allowed to die in peace? I beg you to spare me the mouthings of this minister."

Paulet curtly ordered the Dean to attend in silent prayer, and as he drew apart she dropped to her knees, and fervently kissing her cross raised her hands to Heaven as she exclaimed:

"As thy arms, my God, were extended on a cross, so receive me into the arms of thy mercy. Extend to me thy forbearance and pardon me all my sins." Then she slowly arose and seated herself upon the stool. The executioner, his face covered by his black mask, stepped forward and dropped upon his knees at her feet, begging her, as was the custom of the time, to forgive him for her death.

"I forgive you with all my heart," she said, "for in this hour I hope you will bring an end to all my troubles."

As he arose and laid his hand upon her neck to unfasten her bodice she gently pushed his arm away and calmly disrobed, removing her waist and sleeves, and arranging her hair so that the headsman's blade might have no obstruction.

As the executioner again approached, bearing his cruel axe, she gave a start of surprise, for she had fondly believed that she was to be accorded the privilege granted to the royal personages of France of being beheaded by the sword. However, she said nothing, and he assisted her to arise and conducted her to the block, where she refused to allow her arms to be bound, though she called her lady, Jane Kennedy, who tearfully fastened a bandage around her eyes. Then she knelt and laid her noble head

upon the block, and as the headsman's axe was raised, her last words, "In manus tuas, Domine," rang through the hall, and pierced the very souls of the henchmen of Elizabeth.

As the cruel blade fell and snapped the thread of her troubled life, the last obstacle to an uninterrupted reign was swept from the path of England's Virgin Queen.

CHAPTER XIX

ROYAL IRE

The formal opening of the Queen's court at Windsor was to be attended by the presentation of Shakespeare's latest and most ambitious play, in which it was whispered that he dealt with the life and love of Elizabeth's royal father, King Henry the Eighth. Her Majesty had proclaimed the day a holiday at the castle and had decreed that her pleasure was not to be marred by the intrusion of any business affairs or by the sight of her menials performing their tasks, hence an air of quietude reigned in the courtyard and but few of the royal guardsmen were on duty.

In a corner of Anne Holcombe's laundry, our friend Roger Covert sat with chair a-tilt and feet ecocked up on an inverted tub, vigourously puffing on a long clay pipe and sending up clouds of curling smoke that soon hung in perfumed vapour above the lines of bleaching linen. His sweetheart, who was sitting in a low chair and taking advantage of her day of rest by working a lace kerchief for her neck, suddenly arose, and walking quickly to Roger's side snatched the pipe out of his mouth and dashed it upon the oaken floor, much to the surprise of her lover.

"I'll teach you," she said, "to scent the linen of my Queen with the vile fumes of your rank weed. Why, 'tis likely to cost me my laundry, if her dainty nose perceives the odour of tobacco in her garments. By my faith! you'll not smoke in a lady's presence when we are married, Master Roger. I must have been beside myself to let you go so far."

"May the saints confound you, Anne, but you have a villainous temper," protested Covert, as he ruefully gathered up the broken bits of his precious pipe. "I will smoke when we are married, or married we shall not be."

"Do you mean to say that you would give me up before you would forsake tobacco?"

"Aye, and that I do," said the angered man. "I know a handsome wench in the scullery who would not object to my pipe, and she keeps a civil tongue in her head, and I could live a life of peace and quietness without being berated at every turn."

"You may go to her as quickly as you like," loftily replied the laundress, "and I will not have to seek far for a guardsman whose countenance will lack the forbidding scar that disfigures your own."

Covert arose excitedly.

"Shame on you, Anne," he protested, "to taunt a man with his ugliness. But for all their pretty faces and winsome graces I much prefer my scar, for it marks a turning-point in my life, the date of my meeting with my good friend and master, William Shakespeare, and the beginning of my reformation. However, I will not offend your vision longer, but will carry my foul features to some more hospitable

threshold." He picked up his hat, and thrusting it sullenly upon his head, strode rapidly to the door; but as he darted a quick glance over his shoulder he saw the maid drop upon a pile of linen and bury her face in its soft folds. He stopped and silently stepped back into the room, closing the door with a loud bang as he did so. Then he stood perfectly still and awaited developments.

As soon as the door closed the girl burst into a violent fit of weeping, muttering sobbing protestations of her love for the guardsman.

"O Roger!" she wept, "I thought I was going to be so happy with you, and now I have driven you away. I but sought to plague you about your pipe, but when you threatened me with your scullery maid I knew not what I answered in my anger. I never thought you unfaithful to me, but now you have confessed it of your own free will. Oh! But I'll scratch the vixen's eyes out if ever I meet her in your company."

Roger rubbed his nose and grinned in delight at the maiden's repentance.

"If you only knew," she went on, "how I risked my life to provide for our future happiness you surely would not desert me because of a hasty word. O Roger, Roger! If you will only come back to me I'll never speak crossly to you again, and you may smoke to your heart's content, and colour the Queen's linen to match the bowl of your pipe, for all I care."

The guardsman chuckled softly, then tiptoed carefully across the room and stood behind the weeping maiden as she still uttered her mournful plaint:

"I won't live without you. I'll go and drown myself in the Thames, and when you view my poor body after the waves have given me up, you may feel sorry for the maid who loved you with all her heart, and was true to you even till death."

Roger blinked furiously at her pathetic plea, and as her tears burst out afresh he stooped gently and kissed the back of her pretty neck with a resounding smack. She sprang up with a scream, and as she beheld her lover, her temper again arose at the shame of being caught in her avowal and she delivered a stinging slap upon the guardsman's cheek with her open hand; but, as he laughed heartily and without resentment, her mood changed and she suddenly threw herself upon his breast and flung her arms around his neck, pressing her lips to his, and kissing him again and again as she expressed her happiness in little inarticulate cries of delight.

"Roger, you are a shameful fellow to make such a mockery of me. I do not believe your story of the other maid at all; but I care not what may happen since you have come back to me, for it has taught me a lesson and I will never tease you again."

"How about the other guardsman?" asked Covert slyly, and she gently laid her hand on his lips as she answered:

"Nay. I spoke falsely, Roger, and you know it full well. You are the only man for whom I ever cared a snap of my fingers, and I am truly sorry for

what I said about the scar. I love you all the more for it, and it was cruel to wound your feelings."

"I care not how often you may hurt them, Anne. They heal quickly under the wonderful balm of your sweet lips. But what meant you when you spoke just now of risking your life for me?"

"I do not remember it, Roger. It must have been some flight of my imagination in my agony at your departure."

"Ah, but you are a clever wench. What would you say if I guessed the riddle?"

"I don't understand you."

"A certain maiden undertook to earn five hundred pounds, that she and her lover might give up service and live forever in luxury. But a fleeing monarch returned to Spain alone, and the reward was never paid. Am I not a wizard, sweetheart?"

"You are the Evil One himself!" gasped the girl, as she drew away from him and sank on a tub in her amazement. "You, too, must have been in King Philip's confidence, for I swear that he interviewed me in person and there were none to hear us save his faithful servitor, the Duke of Alva."

"You forget that Elizabeth's jester lay sick nigh unto death behind the sheets in yon corner."

A light broke upon the maiden and she exclaimed:

"The wretch! He feigned sleep, and I was easily gulled by his cunning. 'Twas an evil reward for all my care and tender nursing."

"Nay. 'Twas the best thing could have happened, for by his information my master was enabled to

warn the Queen and to save her throne from the conspiracy of the Catholic rulers."

"But the Queen knows nothing of the plot, Roger. True, 'twas her maiden, Anne Hathaway, that came to the Tower and acquainted the keeper with Mary Stuart's intended escape. He was very angry with me and when I was brought before him he threatened me with the direst punishment, but she interceded in my behalf, and when she told him that Her Majesty was to be kept in ignorance, and prayed most earnestly for my release, he relented and dismissed me, first swearing me to allegiance in future, and telling me that hereafter I would be closely watched. But the poor Queen of Scotland is dead, alas, and all our efforts went for naught. Besides, I lost my five hundred pounds and will have to work hard all my life."

"Nay, Anne, I will tell you a secret in my turn. I have the neat sum of one hundred pounds stowed away, and when we are married you may give up the laundry, though of course I will remain in the service of my Queen."

"Surely you come not by it honestly?"

"Much more honestly than it was begotten in the first place. 'Twas given by Hatton to the Spanish assassin as his reward for killing Will Shakespeare, and I did but save the pieces from rusting in the muddy bottom of the Thames along with his evil carcass, after the fish finished him."

The maiden put her arms once more around her guardsman.

"Let us never quarrel again, Roger, for we love each other truly, even if we are of humble station, and

will live together more happily than any mighty king or queen upon this earth. My one fear is that Pulsi-fer Kyd will repeat his knowledge of my dealing with King Philip, and if it once reaches the ear of Elizabeth my head will pay the forfeit, for since the execution of Mary Stuart two months ago the council has amended the law and conferred upon her the absolute power of condemnation and execution without even the formality of a trial."

"Never fear, sweetheart," said Roger, "the fool is a good fellow, and despite his silly mask is wiser than many of the highest nobles of the court. Besides, he owes us a deep debt of gratitude which he will never forget, but will help us in turn if ever it lays in his power. What say you, my dear, if I ask my captain for a fortnight's leave, and bring a minister with me after the play is over to-day?"

"Your will is my law," said the laundress, as she buried her head in his bosom. He laughed joyously as he crushed her in his tight embrace, then released her, and darted through the door and ran swiftly across the court-yard, bound for Shakespeare's apartments.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, the royal pageant entered the throne-room and was disposed according to the rank of its courtiers around the person of the Queen. The nobles were somberly but elegantly clad, the half-mourning that they wore being a mark of respect to the memory of Queen Mary Stuart and in imitation of their own ruler's example. However, Elizabeth's black robe was studded with diamonds and other precious gems; and so relieved was she at

having forever disposed of her poor cousin that she was determined to indulge herself to the utmost in the delights of her court, and seriously contemplated naming the day for her wedding with the Earl of Leicester, who now, for the first time, and in violation of all the established rules of court etiquette, occupied the station at her *right hand*.

A buzz arose amongst the courtiers when they saw the Queen wave Dudley to his seat, and her quick ear caught their murmurs of disapproval, which immediately threw her into an ugly temper, and her suite soon felt the heavy weight of her displeasure, which portended ill for the afternoon's enjoyment.

Pulsifer Kyd, the jester, occupied his accustomed place at the Queen's feet, looking fatter and jollier than ever in his life before. He felt the impending storm and endeavored to turn Her Majesty's mind to thoughts of laughter by a merry quip at Sir Thomas Hatton's expense, but she curtly told him to hold his tongue, and he subsided.

Essex, Southampton, and Will Shakespeare stood near the dais. The young Earl had fully recovered from his wound, but still looked ill and pale as the result of his long confinement to his couch. He was gloriously happy, however, for he had asked and been granted an audience with the Queen on the following day, when he had determined to inform her of his marriage.

Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake were also in attendance, though the rugged captain wore his left arm in a sling and never once glanced in Essex's direction.

Elizabeth glared about the hall, determined to create a diversion and to remove attention from Leicester. Suddenly she spied Anne Hathaway, standing quietly apart from the rest of the maidens, with eyes downcast and lacking the color that usually flamed on her fair cheeks. The Queen spoke shortly:

"My hand-maiden appears lonesome. Is there not a gallant in all this simpering court to bear her company? By my faith, I'll command some one of my lords to wed this girl before the play, if the curtain is much longer delayed."

A half-dozen eager nobles pressed quickly forward, but she feigned not to notice them.

"Robert Devereux," she commanded sharply, "do you forsake your friends and entertain my lady for the balance of the afternoon."

Essex had felt very bitter toward Anne Hathaway ever since her snub of his friend Will Shakespeare on the occasion of his first appearance at court, and he was determined to have nothing to do with her, so he calmly continued his conversation and paid no attention to the order.

Elizabeth's eyes blazed in anger. "My Lord of Essex," she said, "are you aware that you were addressed by the Queen? You will comply with my command at once or I will have you dismissed from the court."

Essex nodded to Southampton, as though in response to some query, and facing about, deliberately turned his back upon Her Majesty. At this insolent and open defiance of her authority, the Queen's smouldering rage burst forth in full flame, and

throwing her dignity to the winds she leapt from her chair and strode down the steps of the dais, kicking the jester out of the way in her descent. She rushed upon Essex and fetched him a sounding blow upon either cheek, first with her right and then with her left hand, cursing him furiously the while.

The Earl calmly turned and scrutinized her coolly for a moment.

"If you were a man, your Majesty," he said, "I might have the pleasure of dealing with you as I did with your captain, Sir Walter Raleigh; but as you are only a silly woman, and have violated all the bounds of propriety by seating your favourite at your right hand, you need not expect the submission and service of your outraged courtiers. Go back to your throne, and the next time you play at striking earls, slap one nearer home."

For some unaccountable reason the bold woman quailed at his daring thrust, and facing about, walked quietly to her station, never referring again, either in public or in private, to the incident, and Anne Hathaway spent the remainder of the afternoon without the companionship of an escort.

The tension was relieved by the rise of the curtain, and Shakespeare's friends fondly hoped that the unpleasant episode would soon be forgotten in the Queen's enjoyment of his play; but they were doomed to disappointment, for during the first scenes she was restless and abstracted, turning to Leicester frequently and conversing on some foreign subject.

At the entrance of Catherine of Aragon, however, her attention became diverted and she listened breath-

lessly to the words that fell from the noble Queen's lips; but as the waning love of Elizabeth's royal father and his amours with the beautiful Anne Boleyn were depicted, her anger arose, and she would have arisen and interrupted the play had not Dudley laid his hand upon her arm and restrained her. When the curtain fell upon the act, she turned quickly to her favourite:

"Leicester," she said, "what think you of this insolence? Why, the wrongs of Catherine are presented most piteously, and she is pictured as a saint, while my own martyred mother is made but little better than a wanton. I tell you I will not brook such license. If I but extend my hand in gracious favour, 'tis turned upon and bitten by the curs. I've treated this fellow Shakespeare too well, and, by my faith, should send him to prison for this infamy."

"Nay, nay, your Majesty. 'Tis but a play, and his imagination has run riot. He means no disrespect. Let us await the unraveling of the plot ere you pass judgment."

The Queen subsided and witnessed the further progress of the performance in sullen silence, and the faces of her courtiers, taking pattern of Her Majesty's scowling visage, wore every one the aspect of a frown. When the final scene opened, and, amidst a flourish of trumpets, her own name was announced, she grasped Leicester's arm, and a pleased smile o'erspread her face, and as the Archbishop of Canterbury predicted his glorious future for the child Queen she fairly beamed and forgot all her anger as her vanity expanded under the spoken praise.

But her happiness was short-lived, and its knell sounded when, following King Henry's interruption, Cranmer uttered his fatal prophecy :

"She shall be, to the happiness of England,
An aged princess ; many days shall see her,
And yet no day without a deed to crown it.
Would I had known no more ! but she must die,
She must, the Saints must have her ; yet a virgin,
A most unspotted lily shall she pass
To the ground, and all the world shall mourn her."

She hardly waited till the close of the speech, ere she was on her feet and storming so furiously that the curtain was lowered before the rendition of the last lines of the play. Her veins swelled purple upon her temples, and raising both hands, she tore her enormous ruff away from her neck in the excess of her passion.

"Am I to be made sport of in my own castle by this damned upstart of a poet !" she screamed. "'An aged princess, and yet a virgin.' Oh ! you'll rue the day you mocked Elizabeth. And my very death is flaunted in my face. 'Tis a crime to even think of the death of such a Queen as I am, for, by the Gods, the fates assure me that I am immortal. Immortal, do you hear ! and yet this hell-hound cries my death."

She turned to Sir Thomas Hatton, and fixing him with her out-stretched arm and pointing finger, commanded in accents hoarse with rage :

"Hatton, you skulking varlet, run to my secretary, Davison, as fast as your treacherous legs can carry you, and summon him to my presence with a

warrant for Master William Shakespeare's conveyance to the Tower, and his execution at dawn tomorrow morning. Leicester, you will see that he is placed under guard forthwith. We'll see if Raleigh's poet, Edmund Spenser, may not consign this fellow's memory to quick oblivion by his master verse."

CHAPTER XX

IN THE TOWER

As the April sun was sinking behind the gable of the Tower, Sir Amias Paulet sat in his lodging, to which he had been returned after the death of Mary Stuart. He was sadly perusing a document which called for the execution of the poet Shakespeare at six o'clock the following morning, when his door suddenly opened and the heavily cloaked figure of a woman swiftly entered the room. He looked wonderingly at her muffled face until she threw her hood aside and disclosed the features of Anne Hathaway, then he arose quickly and proffered her a seat, which she refused, saying:

“Sir Amias, I have come to you with a simple request. I pray you for a few moments of conversation with your prisoner, and at once, for Her Majesty will miss me if I linger here.”

“It is impossible, my Lady,” responded the keeper. “By the Queen’s express order I am enjoined to deny admittance, absolutely. The Earls of Essex and Southampton have both been here and most vigorously demanded an interview with their friend, and likewise his attendant, the guardsman Roger Covert, who was hardest of all to dispose of; but I was compelled to dismiss them, and the poor play-

wright is to die without the comforting presence of a single dear one or a friendly hand-clasp in farewell."

"But, Sir Amias," she pleaded, "I have always been a favourite with you; do not deny me the only boon that I have ever asked; none will find it out, for I will be as secret as the grave."

"Nay, my dear, although it pains me much, I must refuse. I esteem you dearly, but I hold my honour proof against your pleading."

"And thereby you are in my debt, Sir Amias, for you owe it to me that your honour still remains untarnished and not unthroneed."

"What do you mean, girl?"

"Think you that Elizabeth would have spared her gaoler, if the Queen of Scots had reached King Philip's ship and sailed with him to Spain? Nay, Sir Amias. You would have been degraded before the whole court and your much-vaunted pride would have been dragged in the dust, if an humble maiden of the Queen had not sped to you and whispered a word of warning in your ear."

Paulet spread his palms in dismay.

"You torture me, Anne," he said. "I realize that you command my gratitude, but ask me any other service and 'twill be gratefully rendered."

"Nay, 'tis the only favour I will ever demand. Please, please, grant me this one request. 'Tis easy of accomplishment, and your conscience may rest at peace in the knowledge that you have brought some comfort to the last hours of a dying man." She stepped to his side, and as the elderly noble stood

perplexed and uncertain, she placed her lovely arms around his neck and pleaded earnestly for his acquiescence to her prayer.

At last he gently took her hands in his, and releasing himself from her clasp, he sorrowfully spoke :

"It will be the cause of much unquiet for my troubled breast, but I am constrained to yield. I'll take you to the cell myself and stand guard outside the door, so that no overzealous gaoler may become aware of your visit. Oh! woman, woman! Thou art the cause of many an honest soul's certain downfall!" He turned abruptly, and taking a ring of enormous keys from the wall, he proceeded silently along the corridor and up the stairs, the Queen's maiden following closely in the rear.

Shakespeare sat at a small table in his prison, with arms outstretched and his head resting on them in an attitude of despair. He had been shown the Queen's order prohibiting the admission of his friends, and even his request for the despatching of a final message to them had been denied. He had given up all hope of earthly intervention and had become resigned to his doom. The many events of his life crowded through his brain as he rested in the dim light of his cell. He thought of his meeting with Leicester on the highway, of his happy days at school with Essex and Southampton, of his beloved tutor, and of Henry Wriothesley's successful wooing of his fair daughter.

The memory of his first success before the Queen surged upon him and caused a thrill of joy in his breast. Then the many triumphs that followed in

quick succession danced before his vision. The penalty of fame was illustrated in Sir Thomas Hatton's jealous attack upon his life, which had been so easily averted. And now he was to fall a victim to a fickle monarch's ire. He had thought only to interest her, but his play had given her an excuse to vent her spleen and he was now in the shadow of the scaffold, having lived his short life of unremitting toil upon the road of fame, unloved and unattended by a single creature of the gentle sex. And did he love, in turn?

Aye. He stifled a sob, as he realized that he would have given up his future at court, his friends, his all, could he but have been assured of the companionship of the one woman amongst the many butterflies of the Queen's train, for the balance of his life. But it was not to be, and he closed his eyes, as a feeling of welcome for the executioner's blade settled upon his weary soul.

He failed to note the click of the opening lock, and not until the closing door jarred his senses did he arouse and raise his head.

He saw a woman's figure standing quietly in the shadow of the falling twilight, and he sprang eagerly to his feet and stretched out his hands in welcome.

"Juliet," he said, "how did you gain admittance; and have you brought a message from my friends?"

The cloaked form slowly shook its head and a strangely familiar voice answered him:

"Nay, you are not favoured by a visit from the beautiful Italian, though you must be sorely disappointed at this dashing of your hopes."

As he recognized the tones of Elizabeth's hand-maiden, and the realization dawned upon him that the woman for whom his soul had hungered stood before him, he could not repress a cry of delight.

In a voice trembling with eagerness he addressed her :

"What brings you here, Mistress Hathaway?" he questioned. "In the highest flights of my imagination, I never dreamed that you would seek my prison cell"; and he drew the single chair forward, pressing her to be seated.

"Nay," she said, "my visit must not be prolonged. I have come after my garter, and to tell you that I am sorry"; and she stretched out her hand. He took it gently and pressed a kiss upon it. Then, stepping to the table, he took a silken packet from his bosom.

"I did wrong in keeping it, my lady, and should have sent it back ere this, but some dim hope that you might ask for it in person stayed my hand. 'Tis your right to have your buckle, and 'twould have been a crime to have had it found upon my dead body when the ruthless hand of the executioner searched for his rightful booty."

He unwound the packet and laid its contents before him upon the stand.

"These are my treasures," he murmured softly, as he took them up one by one. "First, a knot of ribbon that fluttered from a haughty lady's sleeve upon the Avon highway, many, many years ago. Next, a jeweled garter, most wrongfully stolen and treasured by an erring man. And lastly, a little symbol of a

mailed gauntlet tightly clutching an assassin's hand. And though this last token has been of great service to me since my advent at court, it is of the least value of them all, for I prize the simple knot of ribbon above any of my earthly possessions."

He picked up the tiny silken strand and pressed it fervently to his lips, while the maiden sank into the chair, her eyes opening wide in wonder.

"The garter comes next," he said, "though not obtained so fairly. These are the only tokens that I have ever had of woman. The last is the gift of a noble lord, and even now might save my life if I but cared to avail myself of its mighty power. But life is not worth the living, Mistress Hathaway, for I will be soon forgot, and other poets will sing the great Queen's praises to the plaudits of her admiring court."

He lifted the buckle and stepped to her side.

"I return you your garter and express my pleasure in its brief ownership."

Anne Hathaway dropped her eyes.

"Nay, Master Shakespeare, I have changed my mind," she said. "I knew not that you prized it much, and doubted not that it now adorned the knee of Juliet Florio."

The poet looked at her as he answered reproachfully:

"Nay, I am not so base. The tutor's daughter bears another name than Florio this six months past."

A sickening fear caused the maiden to turn faint in her chair.

"Do you mean that you are wedded, Master Shakespeare?" she faintly gasped.

"Nay, but Juliet is. She became the bride of my good friend Henry Wriothesley the day before he departed for his estate and left her in my charge. He would have announced his wedding long ere this, but an unfortunate wound which he received in a duel with Walter Raleigh kept him bedfast in London since Christmas day, though I attended his wife on many visits of comfort to her husband.

"I pray you, Mistress Hathaway, to keep their secret, for the news was to be announced to-morrow, but may be still further delayed by my execution."

As he ceased speaking the tears burst from Anne's eyes and coursed down her cheeks; but she brushed them away, and leaping to her feet, clasped her hands, as she addressed him in a voice exultant with joy:

"Thank God! Thank God, who in His mercy brought me here to-day! I have done a noble gentleman much injustice, and I have wilfully denied my heart the measure that it hungered for."

"What do you mean, Mistress Hathaway?"

"I mean, Will Shakespeare, that I love you with all my heart, as never man was loved by woman; that I have loved you from the day I first set eyes upon you on the Avon road; and that I will love you until the grave enfolds me, and ever after through the ages of Eternity. Though, alas, there can be no answering chord within your bosom, for I have surely crushed even your pity by my wayward and disdainful actions."

The poet grasped the table and staggered as if struck by some mighty blow. Then, as the revulsion of his feelings surged upon him, he stretched forth his arms with a glad cry:

"Now, may I die happy!" he exclaimed. "The one great boon for which my very soul has pined is granted me. Or do my ears deceive me, and is this but some vision of a troubled dream come to mock me ere my dissolution?"

He dropped his arm and pressed his hands to his throbbing temples.

The girl hesitated, then ran quickly to him, and placing her arms upon his shoulders she pressed her soft lips against his doubting ones and whispered:

"Nay, 'tis a reality, Will, though I little thought you cared for me."

As the realization of her love swept on him, he seized her in his glad embrace and strained her to his breast as he wildly cried:

"You never thought I loved you, Anne? Why, you have been the one impulse of my worried brain since first I beheld your lovely form. You have been the inspiration of my plays, and whatever of success I may have attained is due to the influence of your spirit which has ever attended my labours. You have been my Queen. I have never realized that there is another in England, and I would not exchange this eve of happiness before my execution for the assurance of a life full of years without your love."

He dropped his arms and leaned against the table.

"And did you believe that I was enamoured of Juliet Florio?" he asked, laughing lightly.

"Aye. I came upon you on the terrace and heard your protestation of love, which I can now understand referred to another; and when I saw you leave the court together I thought you sought the city and carried on your guilty amours in some secluded retreat."

"Thank God that you have learned the truth!" he exclaimed. "But you risk your life here, my darling. If you are discovered, it will go hard with both yourself and my gaoler. You had best bid me good-by forever and seek the Queen, ere my loving embraces bring disaster upon your beautiful head."

She looked at him passionately. Then taking him by the arm she led him to the chair and gently pressed him down until he sat before her, then she drew her skirts about her and took her seat upon his knee, laying her head upon his shoulder with a happy sigh.

"You may take me in your arms," she murmured, "and hold me there until night falls. You may do with me as you will, for you are my lord and master; and when the Queen's minions find me with you in the morning, I will demand to be taken before Her Majesty, and will plead most strongly for your life. She has ever held me in great favour and I believe that I can move her obstinate heart."

"Anne, I love you too well," said he, "to let you encompass your own ruin. Ere I would allow the breath of suspicion to taint your fair name with its scandalous vapours I would plunge this dagger which they have carelessly left in my possession into

my protesting heart, and with my last gasp would call upon you, as you loved me, to return at once to the palace!"

The girl burst into a fit of passionate sobbing, and Will pressed her close to his breast, kissing her soft hair, her lovely face, and luscious lips, and begging her to restrain her tears and bow her head in humble resignation to his fate.

As the evening shadows plunged the room in deeper gloom, a muffled tapping fell upon the heavy door and the faint accents of Sir Amias Paulet were heard in protest at the maiden's delay.

"My Lady," he said, "if I remain much longer in the corridor, the gaolers' suspicions will be aroused and they will institute a search."

She arose and stepped to the door, which he opened slightly in response to her summons. She put her lips to the crack and whispered softly:

"Surely a wife may spend a few hours with her husband." And as the noble started violently, she continued: "I ask but five minutes more, Sir Amias, and then I will attend you. I have but one farewell message to deliver." The gaoler said nothing, but quickly bolted the door, and she returned to her lover.

"Will," she said, as she dropped on her knees before him, "you showed me a third token of a clenched hand. What is its significance?"

"I am sworn to secrecy until death, my darling, and may not reveal, even to you, the mysteries of its association."

"Nay, but you spoke of its influence with a lofty noble. Will you not entrust me with your treasure and let me bear its message to his ear? Perhaps it may stay the penalty."

Shakespeare started violently and then arose and lifted the jewel in his palm.

"By my faith, Anne," he cried, "there may be one last desperate chance! 'Twas given me by Robert Dudley, the Queen's favourite, and at its presentation he entreated me to call upon him in the hour of my need. That hour has come on swift wings, my darling, though I fear that even his influence will avail me naught."

"He has great power, Will. He must have cast a spell upon Her Majesty, for, as you surely witnessed, he was seated to-day at her right hand in the throne-room."

"In sooth he was, and 'twas the cause of all my trouble," answered the poet; "for the courtiers so plainly evidenced their dissatisfaction that she was wrought up into a terrible state of temper before the curtain rose upon the play."

"The time is flying, Will. Let me take the token and hasten to the Earl, with a prayer for his intervention."

The poet drew her closely to him and pinned the jewel upon her bodice directly over her heart, as he said:

"Go to Dudley, my darling, and tell him that the youth who saved his life upon the highway full many seasons past does now demand his own life in return. That, for himself, he would not move

a finger to extend his worthless existence, but that he has suddenly discovered his image mirrored in the heart upon which he has set this seal of their association; and that he now, by virtue of their brotherhood and common cause, does loudly cry for freedom, that that same heart may not break in anguish at his death."

They were again interrupted by the gaoler's hammering upon the door and his impatient tones calling:

"The time is up, my Lady."

Anne answered loudly:

"I am coming, Sir Amias"; then, embracing her lover, she gave him a farewell caress and sped quickly to the door. As she reached the threshold she turned, and raising her right hand on high, said solemnly: "Dear husband of my soul, I bear your message to the Earl; but if he fails me, I swear before the God of all that I will save your life, even though I have to forge Elizabeth's signature to your release and murder the Queen to-night in the royal bed-chamber.

She tapped on the door, which opened swiftly, and wafting him a kiss from her dainty finger-tips, she darted into the corridor.

CHAPTER XXI

HER MAJESTY'S SUMMONS

Anne Hathaway and the gaoler passed down the deserted stairway, and were fortunately spared a meeting with any of the prison attendants. When they reached Sir Amias's lodgings she thanked him fervently for his kindness and quickly left the Tower, speeding across the dark court-yard toward the Queen's garden.

As she turned an angle of the guards' barracks she ran blindly against the cloaked figure of a man who was hurrying in the opposite direction. The force of their sudden contact was so great that her light form was thrown heavily to the stone flags of the court, and the man staggered and uttered an imprecation under his breath. As a low feminine cry informed him that the prostrate form was a woman, he hastened to her side and gently raised her to her feet, inquiring if she had been injured. She murmured a weak denial, and as the familiar tones of her voice smote upon his ear he started and peered searchingly beneath her hood.

"As I live, 'tis the Queen's hand-maiden," he said. "What brings you in the court-yard at this late hour, and unattended? Surely Her Majesty is in ignorance of your absence from the palace."

The girl gave a cry of joy as she recognized the very man on whose influence hung her lover's life.

"Oh, my Lord," she said, "I have just left the Tower and was on my way to seek you in your apartment. This meeting is fortunate indeed, for I much feared to find you gone."

"Do you bear a message from Elizabeth?"

"Nay. I come from the prison cell of a noble gentleman, and I pray that you will use your favour with Her Majesty to save Will Shakespeare's life."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have interviewed the poet without the Queen's permission? Why, 'tis death for all concerned if this violation of her order is discovered."

"But you will not betray me, my Lord. I have kept your secret these many months."

"True, true," he muttered.

"And will you not help me?"

"'Tis impossible, girl. If I but mentioned his name, she would fly into a towering rage; and so well do I know the influence of Her Majesty's inflammable temper upon her entire being that it might be as much as my own life is worth to broach the subject."

"But she holds you in great esteem, my Lord. 'Tis well known that you can move her when the combined efforts of the highest nobles of the court have failed. I earnestly entreat you to take some slight risk in view of the services I have rendered at your meetings in the tomb-house, and make one last attempt to stay the executioner's hand."

"Why do you plead so earnestly for this man's life?"

"Because I love him and would be his wife."

The Earl gave a great start of surprise.

"Surely this cannot be the truth," he said. "Why, 'tis notorious in the court that you, of all the Queen's suite, most openly insulted him and treated him with scorn, though even Her Majesty bowed her head in acknowledgment of his superior intellect; and there is not another lady of her train but would have deemed it a high honour to have held a moment's conversation with this shy and gentle author. You are indeed a perverse maiden, and I am constrained to believe that you act upon another's request, or else do most shrewdly contrive this prayer as an excuse and to avoid the consequences of my discovery of the Queen's lady in this dark court-yard. Never fear, my proud beauty, I'll keep the secret of your amour, for he is a fortunate man indeed who may sip the honey of your luscious lips." He suddenly seized the girl in his arms, and forgetting his Queen and his conscience in his passion, attempted to press a kiss upon her lovely mouth.

With a strength born of her indignation, she wrenched herself free from his clasp, and stood before him in as fine a fit of fury as ever seized her royal mistress.

"Thank God," she said fiercely, "that I am more faithful in my love than the Queen's favourite. Shame on you, Lord Dudley! I never counted you so base. Will Shakespeare is worth a dozen Earls. What would Her Majesty say if this tale

was carried to her ears? How long would the mighty Leicester sways the destinies of England, if she but dreamed his infidelity? Why, you would meet a speedier fate than my poor lover, and your proud head would roll in the dust, much to the joy of many jealous courtiers who have long and secretly cursed the day that Robert Dudley left Kenilworth for Windsor Castle."

The noble recoiled and stood abashed before the angry maiden.

"I pray your forgiveness, my Lady," he murmured humbly. "I have underrated your character and insulted your pride. It seems beyond belief that Will Shakespeare can have captured your heart; but if he might be saved from his certain fate he would live happy in the possession of the love of that rarest of all creatures at a royal court, a virtuous woman. My feelings made a villain of me, Mistress Hathaway, and if I can do aught to atone, I pray that you will command me."

"Then go at once to the Queen and demand my lover's freedom."

"You are clever indeed, my Lady, and hold me at a disadvantage; but 'tis the one step that I dare not take. I am sorry indeed for your lover, for I have ever considered him a true man amongst many shallow and fickle courtiers. Ask any other favour and it will be granted quickly."

"I desire naught but his freedom," sobbed the distraught girl.

"Then, as I am powerless to serve you, I will take my leave," said Dudley. "I hope that you will bear

your loss bravely, for grief, mercifully, does not endure, and you may find solace in the love of some more fortunate noble." He lifted his broad hat, bowed low, and turned upon his heel.

Ere he had stepped three paces the maiden darted to his side and fiercely clutched his arm.

"If you will not listen to a woman's prayer," she hissed in his ear, "perhaps you will pay some heed to the claim of Will Shakespeare's mute messenger upon your memory."

As he looked at her wonderingly, she drew his half-resisting form along the barracks wall to where a dingy lantern shed its fitful gleam upon the deserted embrasure. She stopped beneath its ray, and casting her cloak from her shoulders, said, as it fell softly on the flags:

"Fix your eyes, my Lord, on the token that I wear upon my heart. Does it not cry to you from the dim recesses of the past and waken a thrill of gratitude in your noble breast?"

The Earl stooped quickly and scrutinized the jewel.

"Why, 'tis the badge I gave Will Shakespeare nigh four years agone," he muttered.

"Aye. He saved your life then, Lord Dudley. Will you not at least return the favour? Though even in his dire extremity he would never have appealed to you had I not forced him through my love."

Leicester pressed his hand to his throbbing temples, and stood uncertain and bewildered beneath the lantern.

"If it had not been for his brave action and his ready aim, my bones might lie unburied and unknown these many years in some deserted waste. He foiled my enemies, and I owe him much. I must, I will use some endeavour to move Elizabeth to pity; but I am all at sea to give a sufficient reason for my interference."

"What if I could prove to you that the Queen owes much—aye, the safety of her throne and even her life to his zeal and faithful service?"

The Earl eagerly clutched her arm.

"If such a thing were possible we might even yet win the day, my girl," he answered.

"What would you say if I told you that Will Shakespeare discovered a plot for the flight of Mary Stuart with the Spanish King, and being too modest to claim the credit, he chose me as his messenger to Her Majesty, despite his harsh treatment at my hands, and the Scottish Queen was intercepted at the very threshold of her prison through his timely warning; though I did not see fit to disturb the Queen with a rumour of the intended escape."

"My God!" gasped Leicester, "can this be true?"

"I have never violated my honor by a lie, Lord Dudley."

"Then we will save your lover, my girl, even though we have to use force in compelling Her Majesty's attention to our tale."

"The execution is set for sunrise to-morrow, therefore your action must be taken at once or it will be too late, and it is impossible to gain admission to Her Majesty without the knowledge of her attendants."

"True, true, my Lady," said the Earl; "and if they but announce my wishes 'tis certain that she will deny the interview. 'Twill please her much, in this abominable temper, to slight Robert Dudley."

"Oh! What are we to do, my Lord?" asked the distracted girl. "May I not conduct you to her presence? The other maidens recognize that I am privileged, and would not dare gainsay me if I told them 'twas Her Majesty's wish."

"Nay. Their babbling tongues would soon raise sad havoc with Elizabeth's honour if we thus entered her apartment." He frowned and stood in silence for a moment, then sharply struck his hand upon his thigh, saying: "By God's wounds, I'll do it! Do you seek your room and remain there quietly until the Tower clock strikes ten, then venture out into the dark again and meet me on the step of Wolsey's tomb-house. We'll find a way to the royal presence through the secret passage."

The maiden sadly shook her head.

"'Twill not avail, my Lord, the door is locked," she said.

"The Queen has at last yielded to my importunities and but yesterday entrusted me with the key," he answered shortly, as he picked up her cloak and placed it around her drooping shoulders.

The girl's eyes lit up with a wondrous expression of hope as she turned them upon the Earl.

"I freely forgive you, my Lord," she murmured, "for your attempt upon my chastity; and if you wish, you may in honour take a kiss of friendship and of gratitude from my willing lips."

"Nay, I would not poach upon the preserves of my good friend the poet," he said. "Let us hope that he may be spared to take full measure of your caresses ere to-morrow's sun has waned."

Shortly after the stroke of ten, Queen Elizabeth was awakened from a light sleep by a muffled tapping upon the wall of her chamber, and as she sat up in her bed with a startled cry, she was astounded to see by the dim light of her single taper the panel of the secret corridor fly open and the Earl of Leicester step quickly into the room. Her fear gave way to a violent outburst of rage, and she hurled furious anathemas at the intruder's head.

"How dare you violate the sanctity of my bed-chamber at this hour of the night, Robert Dudley? I trusted you when I delivered you the key, thinking that I might occasionally have your companionship, undisturbed by the curious eyes and ears of my attendants; but I find that you are but a creature of your vile passions and I despise you for it. Leave my presence at once, and return the key to me instantly!"

The Earl opened his lips in protest, but she would have none of it.

"Out of my sight," she commanded, "or I will arouse my attendants and have you committed to the Tower!"

As she stormed, Anne, who had been standing in the passage and had heard the angry words, thinking that her presence would have a reassuring effect

upon her mistress, stepped into the chamber and stood quietly at Leicester's side.

This last arrival was too much for the Queen, and flinging aside all semblance of modesty along with the royal bed-clothing, she leapt upon the floor and strode across the room, her silken night-robe flying wildly about her bare feet. Arriving in front of Anne, she struck her viciously upon the cheek with the flat of her hand.

"You infamous wench!" she said, as the girl sank sobbing at her feet, "you, too, are in his confidence. No doubt he has half the ladies of my court as his mistresses, though he thinks to deceive me with his lying tongue."

A dark flush mounted Dudley's brow, and he seized the Queen's wrist in his iron grasp and looked into her face with such a world of anger in his glance that even this fearless woman quailed before him.

"For shame, Elizabeth, to cast slander on this pure maiden's name!" he said hoarsely. "I'll overlook the foul accusation you hurled at my innocent head and treat it with the scorn that it deserves, but this poor girl's cup of sorrow is filled to overflowing by the peril of the man she loves, and we come to you on an errand of life and death that could not be compassed by any other means."

"Well, what is it brings you here?" asked the Queen in a milder tone.

"If you will garb yourself more fitly for an audience, I will be pleased to enlighten your Majesty," he answered, with a stiff bow.

Elizabeth quickly turned her back upon him, and the forgiving hand-maiden ran to her wardrobe, and taking a long cloak of sable and ermine, she wrapped it, 'round her mistress's scantily clad form, and placed a pair of dainty slippers upon her naked feet. Then, as the monarch seated herself in a chair by the bed, looking indeed most regal in her rich furs, the girl dropped meekly on her knees at her side, though her cheek tingled smartly from the blow.

Leicester turned and closed the panel, then stepped swiftly before the Queen. He placed his finger lightly upon Anne Hathaway's bosom. "Do you recognize that token, your Majesty?" he asked sternly.

"Why, 'tis the badge of our great organization," she answered, in surprise. "But how comes it that this girl wears the jewel? Our members are all men, save myself alone, and you have violated your oath if you have entrusted her with the secrets of the order."

"It has no significance in her eyes, save that it holds forth a promise for her lover's life."

"I tell you that the wayward chit has no lover, Robert. You talk in riddles."

"And I assure you that she has, Elizabeth, and that she and her sweetheart have both served you faithfully and well, and have contrived much for the furtherance of 'The Queen's Life.'"

"Then, in God's name, who is the man, my Lord?" she asked impatiently.

"The poet, William Shakespeare, whom you so unjustly condemned to death this afternoon in a fit

of temper, and who, as you should know, though I presume you have forgotten, wore the jewel upon his sleeve the day he first appeared at court."

The Queen arose and answered him coldly:

"This is utter nonsense, Dudley. The girl despises him. Why, she told me with her own lips that he was not a man of honour and intrigued much with a certain woman. Nay. The royal word is given. He dies to-morrow."

Anne clasped her mistress's knees.

"I was much mistaken," she sobbed, "he did but guard the wife of his friend from Slander's tongue, though I knew it not at the time. And I love him with all my heart, as he loves me. Oh! my dear Lady, you granted me his life the day he killed your deer in Fulbroke Forest—let your heart incline to pity, and spare him once again."

"He has insulted me most grossly!" angrily replied the Queen, "and you waste breath, for I am determined that he will never have another chance to lash me with his venomous pen."

"And, as Mary Stuart is dead, you need him no longer to protect you from her plots with Philip, and to place a stumbling-block in the pathway of her escape to the King's good ship."

Elizabeth looked at the Earl with a puzzled expression.

"What the Devil do you mean, Robert?" she queried.

"That if he had not warned Anne Hathaway of a conspiracy that took place in your laundry, Mary, Queen of Scots, would now be named Mary, Queen

of Spain, and your ministers would be working like bees to outfit an army for the protection of England against their invasion, while Sir Francis Drake's ships would speed across the mighty Main to engage in deadly conflict with their formidable fleet."

The Queen's eyes opened wide.

"What fairy tale is this? Do not think to gull me so easily. The poet has ever been too deeply immersed in his books to spy out plots within my court, and Mary was so closely guarded that any thought of her escape could never have been entertained."

She turned to Anne.

"Did you tell Leicester this lie, in the hope of saving the fellow's life?" she asked.

The girl rose proudly to her feet.

"You know that I have never uttered a falsehood in all my life, and you have often told me that you trusted me alone of all your maids. Nathless, if you will summon Sir Amias Paulet, the Keeper of the Tower, whose honour no man can deny, he will inform you that in consequence of my warning he stopped a laundress at the prison gate and found the face of Mary Stuart 'neath her shawl."

The Queen gasped and looked blankly, first at the man and then at the maid, as the conviction of belief settled upon her.

"What shall I do, Robert?" she asked faintly.

"If all other prayers fail to move your Majesty, still you are bound by the oath of our common cause to heed this token of the gauntlet and to answer the cry of a comrade for relief."

"True, true, Dudley," she said. "The poet's life is saved. There, there, Anne!" she protested, as the girl gave a cry of joy and fervently kissed her hand, "my fingers may be put to better use. Fetch me parchment, ink, and pen, and I will write a summons to the gaoler."

The happy girl brought the desired articles, and the Queen wrote as follows:

"Sir Amias Paulet:

"The execution is deferred. Send me the person of William Shakespeare to the throne-room at eight o'clock to-morrow morning, and see that he is strongly guarded. Tell him nothing of my change of plan.

"(Signed.) ELIZABETH."

"Anne, my dear," she said, "you will sleep with me in my own bed to-night and see that I awaken early. Robert, bear my message at once to the Tower, and rouse Sir Amias from his slumbers. Attend me in the morning."

"What of the key to the secret passage, your Majesty?" he asked, as his eyes twinkled.

"Do not lose it, Dudley," answered the Queen.

CHAPTER XXII

THE POET'S PRIZE

As the gray dawn filtered through the bars of Shakespeare's prison cell it found the poet fully dressed and awaiting the summons of the executioner.

A silken packet lay upon the table beside three folded missives addressed respectively to Mistress Anne Hathaway, Robert Devereux, and Henry Wriothesley. The prisoner had availed himself of his gaoler's offer of parchment and a taper, and had remained at the stand late into the night writing his tender farewells and last messages to the sweetheart and dear friends he loved so well. After he had completed his letters he sat buried in sad thoughts until the candle fluttered and went out, plunging the room in total darkness. He laid his weary head upon the table, and fitful snatches of sleep came to soothe his spirit, until the chill of the morning penetrated his frame and he arose and paced restlessly up and down the floor, praying eagerly for the speedy arrival of the gaolers and the release of his harassed spirit. But as the minutes dragged slowly on and the hour set for his death passed without the sound of their approaching footsteps, he became almost frantic at the delay, and drawing him-

self up to the iron-barred window ledge, closely scanned the deserted court-yard, but there was never a sign of life to greet his despairing vision. He threw himself upon the floor in his distraction and lay in a state of semi-stupor until the Tower clock had struck the second hour since dawn. As the last stroke of eight was ringing in his ears, he heard the sound of clanking steps upon the stairs. He jumped to his feet quickly, and with clenched hands and shortened breath awaited the servitors of the headsman.

The key turned in the lock, the door flew open, and Sir Amias Paulet entered, attended by two armoured soldiers of Her Majesty's guard.

"You have come at last, Sir Amias," said Shakespeare. "'Twas unlike your tender nature to keep me in this cruel suspense. I have lived ages since the dawn, and pray you speed me quickly to the fatal block. I crave your assistance in the delivery of these last messages to my friends—letters each for a loving maiden and two noble Earls, and a purse for a faithful guardsman as a wedding-gift from his master."

"Put your messages in your bosom," gruffly answered the gaoler; "the time is not yet ripe for their reception."

The poet looked wonderingly at Sir Amias; but thinking that he did not wish to receive the letters ere the headsman's block was reached, he thrust them beneath his jerkin and answered nothing.

With a guardsman on either side and Sir Amias Paulet leading the way he traversed the court-yard

and entered the main corridor of the royal castle, passing up the stairs and halting before the door of Her Majesty's throne-room.

"Surely they would not be so cruel as to despatch me here and make my death the sport of royalty, Sir Amias," he said, completely bewildered by the turn affairs were taking.

"Keep silent, and follow my directions," ordered the noble, as he pushed open the door and strode into the great hall. As they walked across the floor, Shakespeare beheld the Queen, seated on her throne and clad in her most regal gown, with crown upon her head and an ominous scowl mantling her brow. Save for Her Majesty's presence the great room was entirely deserted, with never a sign of scaffold, of headsman, or of block. Paulet and the guardsmen escorted their prisoner to the dais and the gaoler dropped upon his knee before the Queen. She surveyed the poet critically for a moment, but he looked back into her beady eyes with never a waver of fear in his steadfast gaze.

"Sir Amias," said Elizabeth, "you may take your guardsmen and withdraw to the Tower. I will go security for this man, and will summon you when I am ready for his execution."

His escort left the room, and the Queen frowned anew as she addressed the playwright.

"Did you think to ridicule Elizabeth and live, Master Shakespeare?" she asked. "Why, even Pul-sifer Kyd, the fool, knows better than to risk his life in jests at my expense."

"And thereby does mirror the image of your many courtiers, who, less honest than myself, do train their tongues to words of flattery and praise; sweet music to your ears no doubt, for 'tis evident that they advance much in your favour through this policy," quickly retorted the doomed author.

The Queen's eyes flashed.

"By the Gods!" she said, "you do command still further token of my displeasure. But though you bear a rash tongue, 'tis indeed a brave one to court death so openly."

"Life has ceased to interest me, your Majesty. By your divine command 'twas forfeit two hours agone, and I held your noble spirit in higher esteem than to believe that you would countenance the plaguing of a dying man. I appeal to you most humbly to make an end of it all by summoning my executioner."

"And would you have me stain the polished floor of this noble hall with your life-blood? Nay, nay, there is a more fitting place for chopping heads; and though I insist upon your doom, I do not care to witness your death."

"Then why am I brought before your Majesty?"

"Because I wish to hear the truth from your own lips, and not through the medium of your plays. Do you, in sooth, believe that I will die?"

"Your Majesty is one of God's creatures, even as the humblest menial in your castle walls; and as surely as you are born in His image, so surely will your body wither and answer nature's final call when your life's allotted span has run its course.

Immortality is found in the Temple of Fame and the Halls of Love and Memory; never in the earthly shell, most noble Queen."

The monarch sat back in her throne, abashed by his reproofing answer.

"And think you not that I am beautiful, most learned sage?" she asked presently.

"Yes, but beauty will fade, and 'twill meet a quicker death than that of mortal flesh," he said.

"You are the only man in all my court who has ever dared to speak the truth," she answered sharply. "Even those in whom I have unbounded faith do falsify when my person is discussed, and I, alas, give heed to them and befool myself by thinking that I alone am favoured and imperishable. I know not whether you do me a kindness or an injury by destroying my faith; and though the thought of death plays havoc in my breast, the waning of my beauty does indeed give me much more concern."

"'Twill endure many years, your Majesty, and may you be preserved to a long life of happiness and love."

"You speak me fair, Master Shakespeare. Is not your heart filled with bitterness for my treatment of you? Have you not one last request to make ere I send you to the scaffold?"

Shakespeare bowed his head suddenly and dropped upon his knee before the Queen.

"Your Majesty," he said, "there is a maiden in your train whose beauty is the wonder of the court. She has ever served you faithfully, aye, better than

you know, and I have reason to believe will be affected by my death. I crave that you will bear with her patiently, and that when her grief has passed you will seek some fitting mate to keep her company on Life's troubled voyage. Counsel her to wed, I pray you, for 'twould be a sin to waste her youth and beauty in the single state.

"If you will but comply with my last wish you may in some measure repay her for her love and watchful care. If she had been less zealous in her service, your Majesty's fair neck might have suffered the executioner's stroke long ere the presentation of my play, and I might even now be free to wed the maid, though I would not have it so, for England would have suffered much with Mary Stuart, Queen."

"You are indeed a modest man, Master Shakespeare, to plead another's cause, when 'twas through your agency that the plot was foiled."

The poet arose amazedly to his feet.

"Your Majesty," he gasped, "I thought you were in ignorance of the conspiracy!"

"Ah, my friend, the Queen knows all," she answered, nodding mysteriously. "All about the guardsman and the laundress, the jester and Sir Thomas Hatton, the fish and the assassin, the poet, and— Shall I go any farther?" she queried.

"You are the very Devil himself," muttered Shakespeare. "How learned you these many secrets?"

"Through the lips of that world-old tale-bearer, a woman. My favourite hand-maiden slept last night with me in the royal bed-chamber."

Will answered not, but dropped his head upon his breast and stood humbly awaiting his consignment to the executioner, for he felt that the monarch was but playing with him to make her revenge more sweet and sure.

Elizabeth continued :

"Will Shakespeare, you display a courtly grace, a noble figure, and a handsome face, and even the Queen of England is not proof against the charms of manly beauty." She looked nervously around the room as though in fear of an eavesdropper, then arose and walked rapidly down the dais and stopped in front of the poet, while a rosy blush suffused her cheek.

"Your life may be spared on one condition," she said. "Can you not guess my secret? Think you I would have been so angered were I not in love? I am but a tender woman at heart, and since your brilliant intellect first stirred my breast in admiration, which later turned to passion, I have longed for your companionship. What say you if we cast propriety to the winds, and with you as ruler of my heart and throne let the destiny of our country tend which way it will?"

"What of the Earl of Leicester, your Majesty?" questioned the astounded playwright?

"He irks me much, dear Will, and can easily be disposed of, for I am all-powerful. With your brain and my favour we may make this the most intellectual realm in the whole world. Come, my gentle youth, and choose quickly. On the one hand life and love and a Queen, on the other a flashing blade and instant death. Do you hesitate?"

"Nay! Not for a moment, your Majesty! Send me to the executioner, for life would be a dreary waste without my sweet Anne's love. Shame on you for a fickle wanton! I would that Robert Dudley could hear your words, for he is an honest gentleman and my good friend."

"He needs no champion!" thundered a deep voice behind the throne, and through the folds of the heavy arras stepped Leicester himself, and strode straight to the poet, holding out his hand as he said:

"Nobly spoken, young master. Would all lovers were as true and friends as staunch as William Shakespeare."

The Queen laughed merrily and shook her finger at the Earl.

"Now, what do you think of my trick? By my faith, it was a crucial test, though you hated much to have me risk it. Did you fear to lose me, Robert?"

"Nonsense!" muttered the Earl, as his face reddened, while Shakespeare looked in dismay, first at the Queen and then at the Lord.

"Well, well," said Elizabeth, "I hardly know what to do with this troublesome fellow. I'd best banish him to some desert island where he may sing his poems to the sea; and though 'twill rage and roar as I have, it needs must lap his feet at last and fall away weakly to its coral bed. If I keep him here at court I dare not prophesy to what great lengths his audacity may carry him. He angered me so yesterday that I would have his life, though to-morrow he may strike a balance and with some new antic of his

fat fool, Falstaff, bring tears of merry laughter to my eyes and crack my shaking sides with glee."

She beckoned to Leicester, who stepped to her side, inclining his head as she whispered in his ear. When she had finished he smiled and nodded, and ascending the dais disappeared behind the arras.

The Queen mounted the steps to her throne, and seating herself therein, leaned back with folded arms and looked quizzically at the sadly troubled man.

"What do you think of my little comedy, my friend?" she asked.

"Is it not to have a tragical ending, your Majesty?" he replied, as the light of awakened hope gleamed in his eyes.

"Nay, 'twould be a sin to put to death the man who scorns a Queen's love. I have a better fate in store for you."

He stepped to the throne, and dropping humbly to his knee bent to kiss the hem of Elizabeth's robe, but she pulled it aside quickly.

"I am not worthy of such homage, my dear friend. Reserve your kisses for your lady-love, for she is a better woman than I, in that she brought me to my senses and prevented me from doing a cruel and unqueenly act."

As she raised him to his feet the arras was pushed aside and Leicester again stepped forth, holding by the hand the poet's sweetheart, Anne Hathaway, who was clad in a simple robe of white and was closely followed by the Queen's sleek minister, My Lord Bishop Kitchen of Llandaff. They had scarce descended the steps ere Pulsifer Kyd, the fool, pranced gayly from behind the tapestry and dropped

at the feet of the Queen, winking grotesquely and wiggling his ears at the fat churchman.

"I have a mind to name your wedding morn, friend Shakespeare," said the Queen. "Is it not a fit ending to your pilgrimage from the Tower?"

"But, your Majesty," he protested, "I am not fitly clothed, and Anne will surely want some time for preparation."

Didst ever hear the like of that, Kitchen? And you are always dinning marriage in my ears. Does it appear to you that your sweetheart is not prepared when she is summoned by a private stairway from my apartment, where she has been waiting for an hour with this minister ready at hand? And as for your apparel—you wear the rich mantle of love in every lineament of your fair face and figure. What finer garb could any maiden crave?"

Shakespeare turned to his sweetheart.

"Do you wish to wed me now, my darling?" he asked, as she turned her luminous eyes in love upon him.

"Yes, Will," she said. "I have lost many precious hours through my perverseness and my heart hungers for your company."

"So be it, then," he said. "Your Majesty, I humbly thank you for this noble favour and your forbearance. Let the churchman quickly marry us and I swear that I will offend you no more, but will ever offer you my humble service."

The Queen chuckled heartily and turned to Dudley.

"Do I pay my debts, Robert?" she asked. "Or is there still a balance in the poet's favour?"

The Earl shrugged his shoulders and smiled, while she continued :

"And now, as I am still a virgin and eligible to the office, I have a mind to act as bridesmaid to my lady. And, Leicester, you may attend your friend, the groom. Here, Master Shakespeare," she said, as she drew a jeweled ring from her finger, "is a circlet that will serve to join you twain and the display of which will instantly command my service if ever 'tis required.

"Were ever man and wife made one attended by more royalty?" She looked wistfully at Leicester. "Pray God that Kitchen may do the same for us ere long," she murmured, and the Earl muttered a fervent "Amen." Then with a return of her buoyant spirits she said merrily : "And now I have a mind to complete the pageant. Kyd, you may summon the court."

Anne stepped quickly to her lover's side and tightly grasped his hand, as the jester ran to the entrance of the throne-room and opened wide the doors.

The Queen's entire suite, clad in rich array, marched into the great hall under the leadership of the somewhat disgruntled Lord Chancellor, and took their places, ranging themselves in long lines on either side of the abashed lovers.

Robert Devereux, with Wriothesley and his beautiful bride, pressed close to their friend's right hand, and though they spoke no word their joy was plainly written on their beaming faces.

Dudley's messengers had done their work well, for though many of the courtiers had yawned sleepily and had protested mightily at being routed so

early from their downy beds, none dared violate the royal command, and their drowsiness quickly left them when they realized the occasion of their summons.

The Queen and Leicester took their stations as bridesmaid and groomsman, and the Bishop in his churchly regalia read the marriage service that joined the loving hearts of the poet and the maid until death's parting.

As they knelt to receive his benediction, Elizabeth whispered briefly to the Earl, and when the closing words fell from the minister's lips Dudley drew his sword and presented it to the Queen, who stepped in front of Shakespeare and tapped him sharply with the blade, saying loudly:

"Arise, Sir William, and salute your bride.

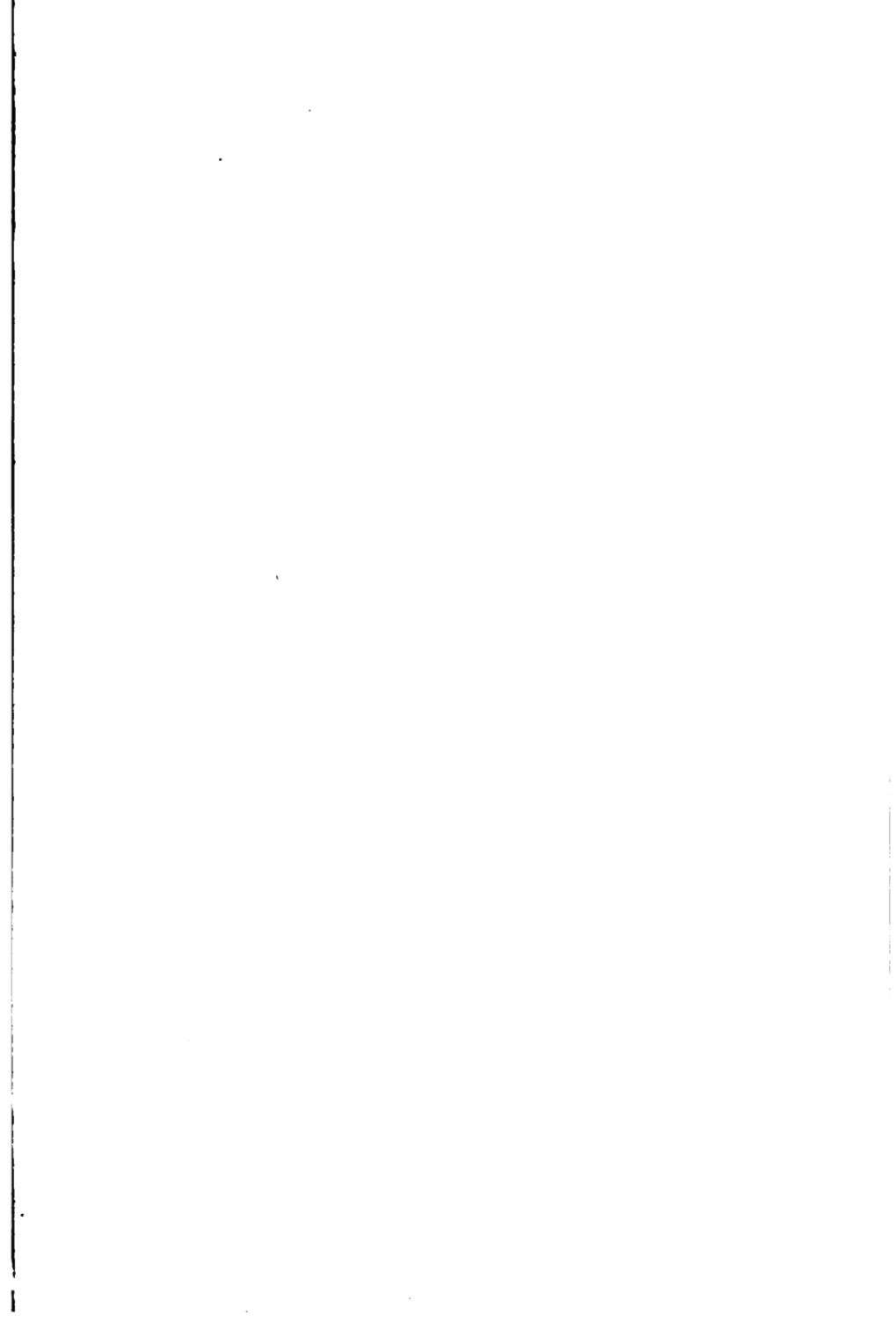
"The poet Spenser needs must wait a space,
Ere we our knighted poet will displace."

As the courtiers and ladies of the Queen's suite flocked eagerly around the fortunate pair, the jester laughed shrilly and caroled in a cracked voice:

"The lovers are wedded,
The romance is past,
We cry, as the curtain falls,
For a kiss ever ready,
A love that will last
Till the voice of Eternity calls.

For an arm to protect
And a sweet voice to pray,
Close bond between husband and wife.
For children to bless them
And smooth the rough way
To the end of their journey of life."









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